‘WE ARE A FAMILY’

Small-town and Rural LGBTQ+ Queering Identity, Kinship and Familial Ties in Today’s China

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Pro gradu-tutkielma '*We are a family' – Small-town and Rural LGBTQ+ Queering Identity, Kinship and Familial Ties in Today's China* on queerfeministiseen tutkimusteoriaan ja metodiikkaan pohjautuva kvalitatiivinen tutkimusprosessi, joka on toteutettu yhteistyössä kahdeksan mannerkiinalaisen, maaseudulta tai pikkukaupungeista Pekingiin, Shanghaihin ja Guangzhouhun muuttaneen queer-identifioituvan henkilön kanssa. Tutkielma keskittyy tarkastelemaan näiden kahdeksan henkilön elämää, haasteita ja haaveita sekä yksilötasolla että siinä yhteiskunnallisessa ja kulttuurisessa kontekstissa, joka muokkaa heihin kohdistuvia odotuksia ja sosiaalisia paineita.

Tutkielmassa pyritään tietoisesti kohtaamaan haastateltavat yhteistyökumppaneina, joiden kanssa käydään keskustelua ennen ja jälkeen haastatteluiden, ja jotka ovat omalta osaltaan vaikuttaneet tutkimusprosessin kulkuun. Queerfeminististä metodiikkaa noudattaen tutkimuksen rakenne on joustava ja akkumulatiivinen, ja queerfeministinen ajattelu leikkaa läpi koko tutkimusprosessin – teoriataustan ja metodiikan valinnasta haastateltavien turvalliseen rekrytointiin, ja siitä yhä julkaisuun saakka.

Lähdekirjallisuutena on käytetty sekä akateemisia artikkeleita että uutisia – lähdekirjallisuus on pääosin queerfeminististä teoriaa ja metodiikkaa, sosiologiaan keskittyvää sinologian aineistoa, sekä etnografioita ja muita pienempiä kvalitatiivisia tutkimuksia LGBTQ+-väestön elämästä Manner-Kiinassa ja sinofonisessa maailmassa laajemmin.

Itse tutkielman pääasiallisena materiaalina ovat 8 semistrukturoitua haastattelua, jotka on toteutettu Kiinassa (ja kahdessa tapauksessa videopuheluna) vuosina 2017-2019. Lisäksi aineistona on käytetty keskusteluita ennen ja jälkeen haastattelujen, mikäli jokin on vaatinut lisäyksiä tai tarkennuksia. Haastattelut ja muut keskustelut on käyty mandariinikiinaksi.

Tutkielma tuottaa lisää tietoa maaseudulta tai pikkukaupungeista kotoisin olevien LGBTQ+ -kiinalaisten kokemuksista, heidän identiteeteistään, lähisuhteistaan, ja vaihtoehtoisista tavoistaan navigoida sosiaalisia ja kulttuurisia sovinnaisuuden määritelmiä ja paineita, sekä määrittää, mitä 'perhe/suku' tarkoittaa, ja kuinka 'valittu perhe' voi tuottaa turvallisuutta ja pysyvyyttä, kun he miettivät ja järjestävät elämäänsä nyt ja tulevaisuudessa.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

Queer China, tongzhi, LGBTQ+ in China, LGBT in China, queer kinship, migration in China, mianzi, face, xiao, filial piety

Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited

Humanistinen tiedekunta

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GLOSSARY

Lāla 拉拉

The term lala is often translated into English as 'lesbian' or 'female homosexual' – however, in colloquial use, just like the term 'lesbian', it may entail a multitude of queer identities including lesbian, bi, and trans (both transfeminine and transmasculine) identities (Kam, 2013).

T/P

Most Chinese women's dating apps require their user to identify as either T (tomboy), P ('laopo, 'wife'') or H ('versatile'). These identities have, at first look, a proximity to western femme/butch -binary. Huang (2015) argues, however, that the T identity transcends sexual orientation and includes sexual roles, gender identity and gender expression, sometimes overlapping with trans identities[1].

LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer: more lengthy abbreviations are sometimes used, letters like I (Intersex) and A (Asexual) added to the list to include a more diverse set of identities. Here, the + signifies inclusiveness of identities not represented in the aforementioned letters.

Queer / Kù'er 酷儿

Once a slur referring to the strangeness of LGBTQ+ folks, 'queer' has been reclaimed and is used by many non-heterosexual, gender non-conforming people to describe themselves. In short, 'queer' works as an umbrella term for a variety of identities that are not cisgender (a gender identity that matches the sex assigned at birth and conforms to the socially constructed gender binary) or heterosexual[2]. The different connotations and implications of the usage of

[1] It is noteworthy that also the English 'butch' often transcends the category of sexual orientation, and masculine lesbians might identify as trans or male while still identifying as "lesbian'. (See e.g. Halberstam, 1998; and Rubin, 1992.)

[2] A more detailed glossary on the LGBTQ+ initials can be found, for instance, on the University of California LGBTQIA Resource Center webpage at: https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary accessed 11:31 19.2.2020

'queer' and 'LGBTQ+' are discussed in the theory section.

Tóngzhì 同志

Tongzhi, or 'comrade' in modern Chinese, has taken a novel colloquial meaning that is approximate, yet not interchangeable, with 'queer' and can be used to describe a multitude of non-heterosexual and trans identities (see e.g. The excellent discussion on the two terms in Elisabeth Engebretsen's and William F. Schroeder's opening chapter of their edited volume Queer/Tongzhi China (2015) pp.4-10).

Xínghūn 形婚

Xinghun, or a marriage of convenience, or even 'sham marriage', refers to a contractual marriage – typically between a gay man and a lesbian woman – which is entered to keep up appearances of heterosexuality and 'normalcy' (Ren et al, 2018). Usually, the nature of the marriage is not disclosed to parents, who are considered one of the main sources of pressure to marry in the first place (e.g. Engebretsen, 2009; Kam, 2013). The popularity of xinghun can be observed in the existence of queer marriage agencies specialised in bringing together gays and lesbians seeking to enter a marriage of convenience (Song & Hird, 2013).

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Political climate and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ populations in Mainland China

The pressure to act on LGBTQ+ legal rights on the Mainland is intensifying as the Republic of China, Taiwan, legalised same-sex marriage on 17th of May – on the International day against homo- bi- and transphobia – in 2019, proving that sinophone cultural values and same-sex marriage are not necessarily at odds with each other. Indeed, the most ardent – or at least most vocal – opposition to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan appeared to come from conservative Christian groups (Horton, 2019). As an officially atheist state, the People's Republic should then by logic be free of the religious opposition to same-sex marriage so adamantly present in Taiwan – and Taiwan, an area deemed Chinese by the PRC government, fitting together a Chinese cultural frame and same-sex marriage has brought up questions about the same possibility on the Mainland. Ah Qiang, who found the PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) of China, told The Guardian's Lily Kuo:

'For some people, they say: "Our government says Taiwan belongs to China. So if Taiwan can allow same-sex marriage, why can't it happen here?"'
(Kuo, 2019)

Xin, the director of Beijing LGBT Center, reflects Qiang's thoughts. According to Xin, the successful legalisation of the same-sex marriage in Taiwan has placed the PRC government in an awkward position, especially since the 'foreign' nature of homosexuality and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as their supposed 'incompatibility' with Chinese Confucian values has often been cited as a reason for opposition (ibid.).

At the same time, the visibility and awareness regarding LGBTQ+ issues are increasing in Mainland China – not least for the discourse surrounding legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan – and LGBTQ+ activists are facing continuous harassment and social pressure from the government (e.g. Fan, 2015; Bao, 2015; Schroeder, 2015), as well as their fellow citizens. Many activists have noted the persecution of LGBTQ+ and other activists has intensified over the Xi era.

The legalisation of same-sex marriage on Taiwan came at a sensitive time period – the year 2019 marked an anniversary of both the 70-year old People's Republic and 30 years since Tian'anmen. To no surprise, the anniversaries have led to an exacerbated silencing of dissident voices (Kuo & Davidson, 2019; Robiou, 2019) Consequently, many activists I have talked to have told me they plan to lay low for the year – some mentioning the popularised joke that this was a 'holiday year' for Chinese activists.

On the other hand, PRC has agreed, as by March 2019, upon five of the UN Human Rights Council's recommendations on improving the lives of its LGBT citizens – among them, passing legislation banning discrimination within a year. The need for protective legislation is clear: in a report by the United Nations, more than half of the LGBTQ+ respondents reported having experienced discrimination (UN survey, 2016). Furthermore, in a survey on adolescent Chinese trans and non-binary individuals in 2019, most correspondents reported experiences of abuse from parents, as well as bullying from peers at school, both of which correlated with problems with mental health (Peng et al, 2019).

Confucianism – the key to understanding LGBTQ+ lives in China or a cultural scapegoat?

Confucianism, a set of values and ideals described as 'the Chinese state philosophy' in school books, is often centred in research around gender and sexuality in China (e.g. Berry, 2001; Chan, 2016; Pang-White, 2016; Li, 2002; Gao, 2003). Confucianism is heavily tied onto the social realm and one's social connections, moral conduct and behaviour, or as Adamczyk and Cheng (2016) phrase it: 'a set of interconnected values and morals about how to interact and behave' (p.3). Understandably, this makes Confucianism attractive as an explaining factor in assessing societal pressures on LGBTQ+ lives, but as much scholarly work already has focused on Confucianism, gender and sexuality, this paper rather focuses on more precise sociological and cultural concepts – namely, those of 'face' and 'filial piety', which will be further discussed under 'Key concepts' in the theory section.

This approach does not mean Confucianism would not matter, or that it would not be in relation to other sociological concepts, like those of face and filial piety. It has, however, been

widely discussed, with several different views on its nature in societal pressures present. In contrast with scholars such as Berry (2001) who has written about what he describes as family-centred 'Asian values', Adamczyk and Cheng stress that there is a difference in attitudes in Confucian and other 'Asian' societies (p.4) and their data seems to support the claim that when it comes to views on and tolerance of non-conforming sexualities, it is the Confucianness of a society that plays a bigger role than the 'Asianness' or 'Europeanness' of a society. Adamczyk and Cheng also assert that while people in Confucian societies are more likely to have negative attitudes towards homosexuality, this should not necessarily be read as a direct result of Confucian influence in the society – rather, they note that there is a correlation between stronger disapproval of homosexuality and Confucian influence in a society. Interestingly, in their findings it is not the disapproval of homosexuality or non-conforming gender roles in themselves that appears to lead into more negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Rather, according to Adamczyk and Cheng, it is the desire to keep the family intact and disapproval of divorce that informs these attitudes (ibid.). The former is rather informative, then, when analysing the difficulty of 'coming out' or otherwise publicly rejecting the heteronormative marriage ideal for LGBTQ+ individuals in sinophone cultures.

It is also noteworthy that there exist factors other than cultural and sociological that play into the pressure to marry and reproduce in Mainland China: the changing population structure of China poses a problem to economy, not unlike in much of the industrialised world. This is a big concern to the Communist Party, to which it is vital to '--keep the population productive and growing, at the right pace and right quality' (Mann, 2011, p.193). Hence, the pressure to marry and form heterosexual families is not purely cultural and cannot be traced back only to an old philosophy such as Confucianism, but comes from several sources and is complex in nature, even as the study focuses on its cultural and sociological dimensions.

1.2 The focus of the study – an intersectional viewing of Chinese LGBTQ+ lives

However, not all under the LGBTQ+/queer/tongzhi umbrella experience the same oppression and violence or oppression and violence to the same degree – the middle class, Beijing-dwelling gay man faces challenges that differ from those a small-village trans woman (Chao,

2019; Rofel, 2007). Scholars such as Huang (2015), Kam (2013), Engebretsen (2009), Rofel (2007) have analysed the lived experiences of lala, tongzhi, and trans Chinese, and this study places itself within the continuum of their approaches, but adds to knowledge by explicitly and intentionally working through practicing intersectionality, queer feminist theory and queer methodology throughout the research process from drafting the theoretical paradigm to data sampling and analysis. The study also adds to our understanding of queer kinship among LGBTQ+ individuals from rural areas and small cities living in large first-tier cities in mainland China, people who have rarely been centred in scholarly works on queer China.

This study looks into those experiences, looking for both similarities in their lived realities and the different attributes that shape and separate their experiences – age, gender, socio-economical class, gender expression, sexual orientation, and cultural and geographical locality, among others. The study is an intersectional viewing of Chinese LGBTQ+ experiences through a queer feminist lens, which applies accumulative and iterative queer methodology to gather data while working together with the interviewees, seeking to give voice to and support Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals from countryside and small cities, and their communities. The focal point of the research project is how these individuals construct and narrate their lives, relationships, family, and futures in a society that in its structures, practises, and normativity poses many a challenge to queer lives and queer love.

Overall, the study contributes with new knowledge by drawing on and positioning itself at the intersection of sinology, gender studies and queer kinship studies, appreciating the importance of previous knowledge from these fields while creating new knowledge about the lived experiences of a part of the LGBTQ+ population about whom we know little to this date.

1.3 Questioning 'Good life' – avoiding essentialist binaries

As the project discusses both happiness and challenges in Chinese queer lives, it might run at risk of offering a simplified, westrocentric and negative reading of LGBTQ+ lives in China. Much of western reporting – be it scholarly articles or magazine interviews – participate, albeit surely sometimes unknowingly, in creating an image of Chinese queer lives that is mostly one of a struggle, enforcing the notion of western moral and cultural superiority. While

not erasing the struggles, I will also look into 'positive' stories, negotiations of traditional values and obligations with contemporary queer lives, give voices to the Chinese LGBTQ+ themselves through interviews, and try to counter negative stereotypes through these stories. In addition, I want to encourage the reader to explore and question the whole notion of 'positive' stories, a notion that often revolves around the western ideals of open, 'liberated', uncloseted homosexuality and queerness (Jackson, 2009) – the 'positive', empowered queer, that is heavily based on western, individualist notions of autonomous self-fulfilment.

In juxtaposition with western individualism, the so-called 'Asian values' are often viewed as a dismissal of the individual Self and a subjugation of the Self to the social, stressing communitarian approaches instead of individual freedom (e.g. Barr, 2004, pp.6-7). However, according to Berry, this set of values can be understood instead as stressing the meaning of social relationships in *defining one's own individual self* (Berry, 2001 p.217) – rather than only ascribing the individual a role in the mass of social hierarchies. Then, the individualistic, westrocentric ideal of LGBTQ+ liberation might not be applicable to Chinese society as it is, as family and other relationships perhaps have implications for and define the Chinese ideals of Self just as they define the social realities of the individuals and the society as a whole. In this sense, it could be understood that the social hierarchy and social harmony precedes the internal harmony of the individual Self – the Self exists as an individual, but in its inherent nature interdependently connected to the family and, in a broader view, the whole society. The paper will go on show how the interviewees build their self-image through reflections of how they are in relation to others – a loyal friend, a loving daughter, a devoted lover, and how different kinships define their imaginations of their past, present, and future.

As the sense of self is so intrinsically tied onto the social, queer lives in China can take different forms and be fulfilled through very different choices than those that we idealise in the western queer culture. Perhaps the whole positive-negative binary about these stories buys into westrocentric ideals of what we perceive as 'good life', but without really explicating the measure of 'good life' used – rather, we take it as a given from our own, western understanding. 'Good life' takes very different forms and meanings depending on the culture in which one is brought up, and the measuring of a life's 'goodness' is a tricky one – hence, perhaps 'positive' and 'negative' are insufficient terms for describing the stories of queer lives in China. Challenges do not equal defeat, and censorship and oppression by the state does not mean queer lives are all underground or non-existent – or as Engebretsen stresses, drawing on

Decena (2008), 'tacit' relationship strategies and queer identities should not be equated with 'silent' (Engebretsen, 2009). This study embraces the active role of constructing tacit sexualities, where queerness is sometimes practical, not conceptual, and tacit, not 'out' by western ideals. It highlights the multitude of sexualities and gender identities that exist in different levels of tacit and open in different contexts and social circles, and, following Engebretsen, argues that these queer realities are by no means 'silent' or 'non-existent', although their practice takes different forms.

2. THEORY AND CONNECTION TO OTHER STUDIES

Introduction

The theoretical backdrop of this research project is a combination of East Asian studies, works on social sciences in East Asian (Chinese) context, and an intersectional, queer feminist approach drawing from the field of gender studies. The project seeks to look at Chinese stories, the research substance thus belonging to the field of sinology, while the data is looked at through an intersectional feminist lens, the theory and methodology drawing from queer theory and queer kinship studies. Queer theory and feminist scholarship draw heavily from postmodernist and poststructuralist traditions (Browne & Nash, 2016, p.1), which places the paper into the continuum of these epistemological traditions.

The intersectional and feminist approach of the project is most importantly as all-encompassing as possible – starting from planning the project, to choosing the bibliography, to the analysis. This means that each part of the research project has been done with a goal to – simply and not particularly humbly put – to make the world a tiny bit better. In this sense, the project falls securely into a sociological research tradition outlined by the likes of Weber, yet not only admitting to 'value-ladenness', but encouraging it. This theoretical and methodological approach follows the framework of feminist philosophy of science and is entwined with the tradition of standpoint theory and feminist epistemology (Harding, 2004, p.1), while the focus on the research substance of Chinese LGBTQ+ lives places the study alongside and adds to the knowledge created by studies by scholars such as Engebretsen (2009), Kam (2013), Schroeder (2015), and Bao (2018).

The feminist approach also turns additional focus to the process of research itself – hence, assessing the methods and the whole research process become as important as the analysis of the data and the findings of the paper themselves. This focus and dedication to transparent methodology is reflected by the depth of the theory and methods chapters, which are here considered not only preparation phases required to perform the 'actual' research, but as feminist research acts and processes in themselves (Brydon-Miller, 2008) – the feminist approach is, then, informing both the theory and the practice – or rather, is *both theory and a methodology* and underlines the entire process, drawing from the tradition of feminist action research (ibid.; Brinkman, 2016; Monk et. Al, 2003).

Alongside the research processes, the role and presence of the researcher is critically observed throughout the process, in line with feminist standpoint theory and postcolonial theory. The process is informed by Spivak's postcolonialism and her concerns towards hapless research on the Other and the construction of an 'Asian' subjectivity – even when the goal is to gather relevant information – while the western researcher is 'disguised in transparency' (Spivak, 2010). It is to avoid this disguise and to stress the *conversations* rather than an interrogation consisting of questions and answers that I bring up my personal experiences, thoughts, and failures throughout the research process (Brinkman, 2006), and to emphasise the 'sharing of stories and identities' (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.128) – it is to keep the researcher in sight and to stress on the positional nature of the knowledge. Sharing my own humanity and stories, negotiating and listening, also highlights the effort to make the research project more collaborative (ibid.) and encourages the viewing of the interviewees as *collaborators* rather than informants (Gorman-Murray et al, 2016). While this in no way extinguishes the power dynamic present in the process of research and the interviews – and assuming this possible might be false and harmfully disguise such dynamic (ibid.) – hopefully it avoids the unconscious fading of the privileged researcher into the background.

The paper, especially its initial research question, was influenced by Elisabeth L. Engebretsen's 2009 ethnography paper *Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals: Affective Ties and Relationship Strategies of Lala (Lesbian) Women in Contemporary Beijing*. In the paper, Engebretsen focuses on the process of 'negotiation' as a process which allows the queer subject an agency in realms that might easily be seen as contradicting: a Chinese, traditional, Confucian family and the expectation of *xiao,* or 'filial piety', and the lived experience and acts as a lala, a tongzhi with a non-hetero sexuality. With Schroeder, they also go on to describe a how Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals show a 'strategic sensitivity to -- customary social norms and apply this knowledge to as they try to establish community, discourse and platforms' (Engebretsen & Schroeder, 2015, p.12) This paper goes on to view a similar sensitivity and negotiation, as the Chinese queers at the spotlight of the study demonstrate the ways the renegotiate and redefine the normative meanings of family, kin, filial piety, and care.

Engebretsen also argues that 'tacit' identities, such as practicing homosexual relationships while not coming out to one's parents, should not be seen as silence or denial of one's identity, but rather, a negotiation which allows the subject freedom and self-actualisation (Engebretsen,

2009). 'Tacit' relationship strategies and ways of actualising one's sexuality and gender should not be seen as globally marginal or unique to China, however: non-white, non-western postcolonialist activists have often questioned the whole binary between the closeted and the open: Musa Shadeedi (2018) notes that the concept of coming out and even the term 'closet' in itself forces upon the non-western subject the notion of western superiority, enclosing the Othered subject in the closet they might not have experienced themselves in the first place. Shadeedi asks whether or not the binary is necessary or even always a real experience in non-white societies, or if it only ever enforces western superiority (ibid.) – Shadeedi does not reach a clear-cut conclusion, but the discussion is definitely worth keeping in mind.

Engebretsen's approach and focus on negotiation of lifestyles, actions and different views on agency avoids and rejects the westrocentric ideal of coming out, and the patronising, rather colonial gaze over different experiences, alternative modes of agency and queer realities in non-white societies. Similarly, this paper focuses on the negotiations, solutions and different ways of living queer lives – rather than only on oppression, the closets, and the struggles – in the Mainland Chinese cultural context. To line out this cultural context, the following chapter will discuss key sociological and cultural concepts in the field of sinology in relation to familial ties and kinship, as well as key theoretical concepts that guide the theoretical paradigm and the methodology of the project.

2.1 Key concepts

2.1.1 Individual self dependent on the collective social units – mianzi and xiao

While this study utilises a lot of theoretical concepts originating in the western world – such as intersectionality and queer theory – the field of study is a non-western society. In this study, this has been taken into account through a combination of postcolonialist caution over one-way flow of information and power in interviews, orientalist views on China, and taking into account the ways sinophone cultural and sociological concepts play into the lives of the collaborators/interviewees.

Two concepts often emerging in discussions over tongzhi identity and societal pressure are

those of 'face', or *miànzi*, and 'filial piety', or *xiào*. The following sections map out how the two concepts have been shown to matter in scholarly works on Chinese LGBTQ+ lives and how they could matter to the research topic of this paper. Finally, the whole paper will go on to show how these concepts, while still relevant and meaningful, take on new meanings and understandings in the queer stories of the Chinese LGBTQ+ people I worked with during the research process.

Miànzi 面子

The concept of 'face' (miànzi 面子 or liǎn 脸) is often central to discussion on social norms, family relations, role expectations and socially oriented values in the field of sinology and East Asian studies at large (Huang, 2015), which in turn makes it an effective discursive tool in discussing LGBTQ+ lives. Mianzi is a concept of social dignity and propriety, one that is collective in nature in that it is perceived as extending to the whole social unit (the family), not only an individual themselves (Furukawa et al, 2011; Rofel, 2007). Therefore, behaviours or actions that would be viewed as contemptible or immoral would bring shame not only upon the person engaging in such behaviours, but also their whole family, causing them to 'lose face' (diūliǎn 丢脸): for instance, the failure to live up to societal sexual norms and enter a heterosexual marriage would risk the loss of mianzi (Ren et al, 2018). However, Joyce L.C. Ma has pointed out that the behaviours causing a loss of face to the family need not be anything perceived as 'evil' or 'malignant' per se – according to Ma, behaviours that simply diverge from the current social norms and typical codes of conduct are enough to bring shame upon one's family (Ma, 1999).

Understandably, this has specific implications for LGBTQ+ individuals – living in a culture where heterosexual marriage and relationships are the only ones offered official legal protections and considered appropriate and socially acceptable (Kam, 2013; Sigley, 2006), queer relationships are then excluded from 'appropriate relationships'. Thus, non-heterosexual relationships break social norms and can be deemed as bringing dishonour on their families in the way Ma (1999) described. In addition, according to Susan L. Mann, social pressure to form (or at least, perform) heterosexual relationships is closely connected to the fear of being outed to those in their closer social circles, like family members and friends (Mann, 2011).

Ren et al (2018) point out how *xinghun* have been adopted as a social strategy by many Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals as a way to maintain mianzi, avoid moral distress, and ensure cultural continuity (p.1).

According to David Yau-Fai Ho, mianzi may also be attained by good social connections – guānxì (关系) – or by wealth and success (Ho, 1976). Guanxi, literally 'connection' or 'relationship', in this particular use[3], refers to interpersonal connections that can be used to one's (or the two parties' mutual) benefit – this could vary from passing the line at a doctor's office to simply posing in a picture with a powerful public figure and being able to refer to this connection. A connection – guanxi – to a powerful person gives a person face – hence, mianzi and the whole set of social norms are also connected to guanxi with powerful or economically beneficial people (Hsuing, 2013), which again are tied to one's social and socio-economic standing. This ties mianzi to (socio-economic) class, which is one of the considerations of the intersectional approach of this study – how does one's socio-economic standing and wealth inform the pressures Chinese queer individuals face, how they view their future, and how they create and negotiate kinship?

However, Huang (2015) argues that while 'in much of Chinese scholarship, face, or mianzi, is examined for its heteronormative function in the instance of saving face - - but face is not inherently oppressive, just as the social is not inherently oppressive'. While mianzi has its negative implications in that the failure to perform within heterosexual norms might cause a loss of face (ibid., Ren et al, 2018), Huang notes that 'social is not the enemy' and 'individualism' is not the antidote, in a way reflecting Berry's analysis of social as an inherent part the individual. To Huang, while clearly having homophobic and oppressive applications, the relational application of face – specifically, in the T/P relationships that are built on the relational and social sphere – can have 'soothing effects to marginalised people', and offer empowering, alternative social realities. (pp.126-127). In other words, in a way, the 'superficial' nature of performative gender roles offers an escape from oppression. Therefore, mianzi or other Chinese social and cultural concepts should not be viewed as inherently problematic, even though the common understanding of them might be viewed as causing

[3] Here, guanxi is viewed mainly through its financial and performative social implications. It is to be noted, however, than guanxi may also take more personal meanings in the more private realm of one's life, and simply refer to familial and other relations (Hsuing, 2013) that may not at first sight be perceived as 'beneficial', at least not in a material way – on the other hand, social or psychological benefits of good familial relationships or friendships are obvious.

moral distress to LGBTQ+ individuals. This is in line with the paper's underlying understanding of mianzi and xiao as cultural and sociological concepts that are somewhat open to reinterpretation, and as the paper will go on to show, many of the collaborators do just that.

Xiào 孝

Xiào 孝, most commonly translated as 'filial piety', is a concept that defines desirable behaviour towards one's elders, most notably, of course, one's parents (e.g. Gao, 2013; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The practice of *xiao* includes respect towards one's parents, obedience and fulfilling the filial duty of taking care of the parents as they age. Engebretsen points out that the pressure to fulfil filial duties is especially heavy of women, as daughters are expected to have a bigger role in care work towards their parents (Engebretsen, 2009). Hence, the expectation of xiao has a gendered component that affects women and the LGBTQ+ differently – a notion that is observed by several of the interviewees, who perceive their parents' bias towards favouring sons and wishing their children would represent their assigned gender.

As both define appropriate social conduct and interpersonal relations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), xiao is closely linked to mianzi. Furthermore, as both concepts relate to one's honourability, propriety and acceptability in their social circles and life at large, maintaining mianzi for oneself, and by extension, one's family, can be considered a part of being xiàoshùn (孝顺), or filial – after all, the loss of mianzi brings shame to one's parents as well as one's own individual self. The notions of mianzi and xiao shape the social ethics seen as desirable in the Chinese society – even today, and both were frequently mentioned by the interviewees in relevance to their familial relationships. However, the paper will follow scholars such as Berry and Huang in questioning the rigid, heteronormative nature of mianzi and xiao, and offer alternative readings of their effects in Chinese queer subjects, as well as represent novel ways of defining what 'care' and 'filial piety' might look like – how caring for oneself might be a preliminary requirement for caring for others, and how love, not obedience, can define xiao.

In terms of familial ties, xiaoshun informs not only the social conduct of the existing generations, but also the obligation towards the reproduction of the family line – 'giving' grandchildren to one's parents. To Travis Kong, the control, or 'family governmentality' reaches beyond acceptable demeanour and avoiding harm to the reputation of the family into biopolitics of heteronormativity: the ideal of healthy, productive and heterosexual bodies, where the subject's sense of moral worth is tied to reproduction and the continuation of the family blood line. (Kong, 2010, p.98)

Kong's approach transcends Berry's view of the social as a building block of the individual, making not only the social and moral conduct, but the queer body and sexuality a battleground for social acceptability and morality. This normative wish of continuity and future-building will be discussed in the analysis section, with different queer perspectives to reproduction and family, parental control over the queer body, as well as a discussion of the relevance of reproduction in the Chinese social welfare system and elderly care. The normative pressures of reproduction and continuity, as well as the concepts of mianzi and xiao that inform them, are shown to affect Chinese queer lives to varying degrees and in different forms, but to hold relevance in the lives of the collaborators, even as they reshape and transgress the traditional meanings of these concepts.

2.1.2 Intersectionality

Introduction of the term intersectionality, in the sense that it is used in today's research discourse, is credited to critical race theory scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (Bilge & Hill Collins, 2016). The concept was then further developed by other writers, scholars and activists, some of whom had already discussed race and gender in their works – feminist powerhouses such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis – in the black feminist civil rights movement. The main objective of intersectional approaches is to bring into light the intersections of different kinds of oppression and precarities, and the notion that the two cannot be assessed or analysed individually: they are inherently intersecting, interconnected (Bilge & Hill Collins, 2016). The black feminists zoomed in on the intersection of race and gender, bringing into attention the specific ways in which the white supremacist patriarchy oppresses women of colour – and how one kind of oppression

cannot be studied with no regard of the other: intersecting oppressions are more than the sum of their parts (Crenshaw, 1989). Even though individuals might share common categorisations – such as 'woman' – their realities are varying due to intersecting identities – such as the realities of a white and a black woman (hooks, 1981): or the realities of a Chinese rural citizen who happens to be trans, and a trans person who is a big city local (Chao, 2019).

Intersectionality is not only about race and gender, but observes the nature and combined effects of intersecting oppressions based on race, ethnicity, class, physical abilities and sexual orientation, among other things (Crenshaw, 2017).This paper applies intersectionality as its theoretical background, taking into account and observing how the intersections of sexuality, gender identity and gender expression, socio-economic class and locality might affect the social pressure experienced by queer individuals in the face of the Chinese society as well as the so-called 'global LGBTQ+ community'. On one hand, Chinese LGBTQ+ citizens face intersecting oppression from their own government and their fellow citizens – on the other, they are faced with historically and continually condescending colonial attitudes from the West, where the modes of queer life are often perceived as representing a 'global' ideal of openness (Shadeedi, 2018) in a highly individualist societies. In addition, the Chinese society has its own modes of discrimination, such as hukou-based discrimination, which affects the lives of urban-to-rural migrants (Kuang & Liu, 2012).

Intersecting discrepancies in Chinese queer lives have been written on by many: for instance, Lisa Rofel (2007) has discussed the intersection of class and sexual orientation in her work on 'money boys' ('kept' young men); Engebretsen (2009) has written on how Chinese LGBTQ+ individual's gender affects the expected forms of care for one's parents, and the trans activist Chao Xiaomi has openly expressed the urgent need to reach out to rural trans people, who face a different, more dire struggle, than their big-city-dwelling trans sisters and brothers (Chao, 2019). Scholarly works such as these speak to the importance of intersectional approaches, since they do – although not always explicitly – map out exactly how the intersections of underprivileged identities affect queer Chinese lives.

Thus, this work is by no means the first to look into these intersections, but an addition to the continuum of works on queer Chinese lives by adding a viewpoint through the urban-rural dimension and a focus on building kinships. In addition, the contribution to knowledge is made through the project's *explicit* focus on intersectionality and queer theory and

methodology. This brings a different view to the table: a view that not only acknowledges the white researcher's privileged position and the subjective nature of 'my' truth – but also, in the methodology, centres the fallibility of the researcher and the process of listening to and learning from my 'research subjects' who are here viewed as collaborators, instead. It is not only the intersections of privileges and oppressions of the interviewees, but also those of the interviewer, that will be observed: the privilege of a white researcher who also happens to be gender nonconforming and pansexual, navigating both queerness and whiteness in postcolonial 'glocal' queer communities of Mainland China.

Ideally, the research can help create connections between individuals and communities, and the knowledge gathered by research can be used to help the communities studied. This wish was worded by one of my interviewees, Waltz[4], an 40-year-old manager and organisation active who wished more foreign researchers would use their privilege and freedom to help Chinese queer communities – not only to 'interview and run' and to be yet another foreign researcherr in the ever-revolving door of curious scholars, but to establish an ongoing conversation and a network of mutual support, to help think about solutions to challenges the queer Chinese face every day. I believe this sort of ideal and practice should be at the core of all queer and feminist research – not only to gather data, but to consider how the information could benefit the communities and individuals who choose to give their time, thoughts and words – their lives – for another person to dissect.

2.1.3 'Queer': theory and research practice

'Queer theory' follows the modern epistemology of the word 'queer' in that it embraces 'the odd' – bringing forth a theoretical framework that is focused on being anti-normative (Browne & Nash, 2016, p.1) and questioning power relations (ibid. p.4). Browne and Nash point out that any scholarly work that focuses on consciously breaking the norms and conventions of the rigid academic world could then be called 'queer' (p.4), which makes defining 'queer' theory and methods a complex mission.

[4] Not her actual birth name. Waltz – like most of the other interviewees - chose to protect her identity and chose this name to be used in the study, instead.

In this paper, 'queer' works as a tool that helps question the boundaries of theory, methods, and data analysis in the same way as Boellstorff (2016) suggests – to Boellstorff, 'data, method, and theory cannot be understood or even defined in isolation from each other' (p.216). In other words, 'queer' is a tool that informs every step of the research process and denies the one-way approach of the traditional research process that moves chronically from theory to methods and data gathering. In this way, in addition to feminist epistemology, queer theory is then related to 'grounded theory', in the sense that theory can be 'discovered in data' (ibid., p.218). This queer approach makes the methodology and theory, interconnected as they are, iterative in nature – in practice, the data collection leads to data that can then change the theory, research questions, and methodology. A concrete example of this is how the interviewees' own emphasis on the meaning of friendships and community along the first interviews shaped the research questions of the whole study to include queer kinships and alternative readings of 'family' – for more examples, see sections 3.4 and 3.5.1 in methods section.

Of course, in all its transgressive glory, the queering of research does not come without its problems. For instance, Taylor (2016) criticises the majority of queer research as lacking focus on intersecting inequalities, especially in regard to socioeconomic class. This paper addresses the concern by explicitly taking an *intersectional* approach which considers class as one of the factors that shape the lives of the interviewees – similarly, gender, age, and language are looked at as relevant intersections. Of course, no study can address all intersecting subjectivities and experiences – however, what queer scholar *can* do to address this discrepancy is remain conscious of what subjectivities and identities are not addressed and called to the forefront in the discourse and what voices and subjectivities might be left silent (Gorman-Murray et al, 2016). Further discussion on concerns on who is *not* represented and was left out the scope of the study follows in the section on finding interviewees (p.29 onwards).

Another critique at queer theory/methodology/research is posed by Browne and Nash themselves (2016): if 'queer research' in itself questions objective truths or even 'truths' in general as the data always follows from situations where power-relations blur the realities, how can any 'truth' be attained at all – on in other words, is there room for epistemology in queer research? Indeed, queer theory appears to point a double-edged sword at 'queer knowing'. However, if we accept situated, value-laden knowledge as worthwhile in itself, the

problem dissipates – *why* should information on something as fickle as human lives be objective, stable, and easy to define? (Here, queer knowing shows its connection to postmodern modes of knowing mentioned above.)

This paper follows Browne and Nash's assertion that 'queer is a term that can and should be redeployed, fucked with and used in resistant and transgressive ways' (p.9): to them, no single queer method or theory exist beyond the notion of 'queer' as that which avoids generalisations, boxes, and simple definitions. It is this fluid and transgressive understanding of what 'queer' is and can be that informs this research project, presenting the data as *queer stories* rather than scientific findings, viewing the interviewees as collaborators rather than sources (Brinkman, 2016), and seeing non-normative readings of concepts such as filial piety as novel redefinitions of the concepts, not as abandonment of the social realities. As a discursive tool questioning normativity, 'queer' allows a flexible viewing of stories by people who inhabit intersecting realities and fluid categories such as rural/urban, queer/tongzhi, social/private. It also allows for alternative readings and blurring the lines around what 'family' or 'kinship' might mean and how they might manifest – thus offering an approach that enables looking at alternative families, kinships and intimacies as equal to those built within heteronormative frameworks.

2.2 Transnational identities: assigning identities vs. self-identification

Michel Foucault has discussed the meaning of available discursive tools and their role in shaping our experiences of the world and ourselves (Foucault, 1978) – in regard to this study, the relevant discursive tools would include (but not be limited to) words and terms such as 'queer', 'tongzhi', or 'LGBTQ+'. Furthermore, Foucault has warned against attaching such terms to individuals whose sexual behaviours in themselves should not be considered proof for ascribing them identities in their contemporary use – rather, Foucault emphasises the nature of our contemporary view on sex, gender identity and sexual orientation as an essentialist, western social construct of our modern time (Foucault, 1978).

Similarly, individuals in other cultures, communities and social environments should be offered the chance to self-identify with these terms before they are ascribed to them – in this

project, only people using these terms themselves are referred to with them (more discussion on this in the methods section on selecting the interviewees). The right to self-identify, to choose one's identity, has been further discussed by queer theory scholar and author Annamarie Jagose, who considers this a cornerstone of contemporary queer philosophy – instead of 'queer' actions, gender expression or behaviours as proof of identity, Jagose points to a queer, self-defined, self-chosen identity (Jagose, 1996).

Passionate on linguistics, language and culture, I considered my choices of words very carefully from the beginning of this project – should I use the internationally widespread acronym LGBTQ+, the more political 'queer', or the endemic 'tongzhi' to discuss the identities and individuals in this study? While 'queer' is often used interchangeably with 'LGBTQ+', the term is also viewed by many as in opposition or contrast to 'LGBT', which is sometimes perceived as normative and further upholding a homosexual-heterosexual binary, and essentialist, unchanging identities. 'Queer' can be seen as more flexible term which better captures the fluidity of sexuality and gender identities while still acknowledging the non-normativity of these identities (Peters, 2005), hence offering an identity more open to novel definitions and interpretations.

For the purpose of this paper, each term offered both advantages and problematic questions: 'LGBT' would be an easily recognisable term, as the abbreviation in its different forms is used by international organisations from the United Nations to Amnesty International – on the flip side, the term, consisting of acronyms of very specific identities might require one to choose their alignment.

It is partially the flexibility that 'queer' lends to the discussion of non-normative identities that has led me to use 'queer', rather than 'LGBTQ+', as the (western) umbrella term for the identities discussed in this paper. Furthermore, the usage of 'queer' avoids the issues of exclusion that some observe in the usage of LGBQT+ - by including lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans, the term creates a hierarchy of identities. The issue could be and is sometimes solved by attaching more letters to the abbreviation, such as A for asexual, I for intersex, etc., yet even then there are identities excluded from the abbreviation – and the abbreviation grows quite lengthy for one. Hence, in addition to being more fluid in nature, 'queer' comes free of this particular burden and creates a category both flexible and inclusive of a variety of non-heterosexual, non-cisgender identities.

2.3 On terminology - juxtaposition of queer and tongzhi?

While 'LGBT' might be considered stagnant or hierarchical as a term, 'queer' and 'tongzhi' avoid this problem as they do not hierarchically name only a certain set of identities, and are by nature less definitive, the only defining factor often being sexual or gender non-conformity (e.g. Engebretsen & Schroeder, 2015; Jagose, 1996; Peters, 2005) – that is, sexual desire and acts that are non-heterosexual or gender identities or expressions that are nonconforming. In the study, however, I have chosen to align with most queer scholars and respect a right to self-define one's identity, as Jagose (1996) stressed.

However, whether or not the western – English, specifically – term 'queer' would be the best common nominator for my interviewees, remained a question especially complex for the existence of the endemic Chinese term tongzhi. While 'tongzhi' has been equated with 'homosexual', *tongxinglian* - especially in public discourse - the term is also been expanded to include bisexual, asexual, trans and queer identities (Kam, 2013). Engebretsen and Schroeder (2015) go further to suggest that tongzhi should not be considered '*as a word but a debate that encompasses a multitude of dimensions and subjectivities across different social, political, cultural, economic, regional and philosophical landscapes*' (p.5). Engebretsen and Schroeder frame tongzhi partly through its historical meaning, 'comrade' – or literally, hanzi by hanzi, 'those with the same will/aspiration', taking into account its political and social connotations and the role of tongzhi in shaping activist movements in China alongside 'queer' (p.6). In the same volume, *Queer/Tongzhi China*, the author and activist Cui Zi'en, interviewed by Fan Popo, similarly describes the meaning of tongzhi to his activism – however, Cui ascribes different meanings to tongzhi and queer:

'For example, in my observation, I would say those widely discussed commercial works such as Milk *are very* tongzhi. *It was a very* tongzhi *picture. -- If you were to compare, the larger an audience a work has and the more commercial it is, the more it could be linked to the concept or* tongzhi. *Otherwise, the smaller the audience a work has, the less it is talked about, the fewer people see it, the more 'queer' there is in it.'*

- Cui Zi'en to Fan Popo in Queer/Tongzhi China, p.246

Here, Cui makes a distinction through the assumed commercial nature, popularity and mainstream nature of tongzhi, while queer is viewed through its niche audience and subaltern nature. Engebretsen and Schroeder also recognise how queer was first introduced in China to academic and activist discourses (p.4). In this sense, the choice of words might encompass a regional, age, or class difference, which makes it a relevant point of discussion for the paper.

However, I would conclude that the usage of both 'queer' and 'tongzhi' in this paper was a conscious choice from the beginning of the project, reflecting both their emergence in past conversations with Chinese friends and the writings of scholars like Engebretsen and Schroeder (2015, pp.4-10) and Cui (2015). Like them, I wanted to stress the conscious bridge-building and shared ground of LGBTQ+/queer/tongzhi people while recognising cultural and local differences. After all, these terms do not necessarily need to be geographically grounded – note, for instance, how Cui describes an US American film as 'tongzhi' (p.246). Similarly, in China, 'Ku'er' film festivals with local films are organised (Fan, 2015). 'LGBT', 'ku'er' and 'tongzhi', as well as 'pan', 'bi', 'trans', and their Chinese counterparts 'fanxinglian', 'shuangxinglian', and 'kuaxingbie', were all used rather casually and interchangeably by my interviewees, and we did not engage in such deep analysis of terminological difference as scholars have. Perhaps it is then sufficient to say that both queer and tongzhi encompass the identities of the people I wanted to talk to *well enough.* This argument will be further explored in the section on finding the collaborators, where the focus will shift to how the notion of self-identification informed the methodology of the study and finding people to work with.

Finally, the terminology and 'identities' should be understood as flexible, under constant change, and perhaps indeed only *sufficient* in describing experience: as the paper will show, many interviewees rejected 'identity-markers', opting for purely descriptive terms on their gender and sexuality, instead. Foucault (1979, pp. 29-30) has described the 'identity', or the contemporary understanding of it as a western construct, abandoning the categorical nature of a stable 'core identity'. Furthermore, in the Lacanian poststructuralist sense, it is the conscious actions that create what we view as individual subjectivity (Zizek, 1990). To avoid the ascribing of identities – even if the term could be understood as purely *descriptive* of one's sexuality through sexual actions – as described and problematised by both Foucault and Jagose, it is important to consider both self-identification and the *act of identifying* with the term as prerequisites for the usage of these terms when discussing queer lives.

This kind of subjectivity-building can be seen in the accounts of the interviewees describing their queerness rather through actions than terminology, for example, 'a woman who likes women', instead of lala or lesbian. Similarly, 'family' – in the case of 'chosen', alternative families, is produced and constructed through actions, such as the consistency of emotional and economical support. The collaborators also construct their alternative families through speech actions such as using familial terms to address each other, building a different kind of kinship – the queer kind.

2.4 Queering kinship

Kin, as defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary, is 'a group with common ancestry, a clan': terms which strongly refer to blood – genetic – ties. How, then, can queer kinship exist in a country which, by its legislation, makes it nearly impossible for its queer citizens to procreate, to produce 'kin' defined in the aforementioned form and that simultaneously ties maintaining mianzi and performing xiao of the subject onto reproduction? To Foucault (1990), family, and kin, is a way to 'anchor' sexuality in a normative, state-controlled relationship (marriage), while Butler (2002) toys with the notion that kinship might be, intrinsically, heterosexual and normative. However, both queer sexuality and kinship often escape these terms and conservative conventions– 'kin', 'family' and 'friendship' take different forms and follow different rules in queer kinship, where tropes like 'being friends with all your exes' (Bergman, 2018) and "'sleeping with 'everyone'" are often realities – after all, due to the sheer lack of options for romantic and sexual partners, queers can rarely afford to follow 'bro codes' or 'friendship rulebooks' that would ban them from forming romantic or sexual ties with former partners of their friends.

Of course, both Foucault and Butler are white, western scholars, and the cultures they refer to – sometimes without explicating it – are predominantly white. Elisabeth Freeman notes that the heteronormative, nuclear-family oriented notion of kinship is in itself very western: Freeman also points out that many racialised and other marginalised communities have always formed kinships alternative to the dominant, western heteronormativity (Freeman, 2007; see also: Stack, 1974). Kinship theories and alternative or subaltern kinships are, then,

also relevant to studies of non-western societies, and to decolonial, feminist, and queer research projects – and queer Chinese kinship – can transcend the western, heteronormative definitions of kin and create new kinships where sexuality and kinship are combined in new, transformative ways.

The way queers have reinvented and reshaped kinship, from adult adoption, to queer squats, to clover families and queer marriages – be it gay-lesbian marriages of convenience or gender-neutral marriage – the story of queer affectionate ties in a world that rarely recognises or protects these relationships is a story of genius negotiation and invention. It also holds a personal importance to myself: my queer family members reside around the world, in Beijing, Shanghai, Melbourne, London and Helsinki – none of these people are bound to me by blood, but are no less family than those I share close blood lineage with.

According to Freeman, queer kinship often escapes terminology: often, the queer kinship simply collapses to the generic, impersonal term 'community' – a term which leaves out and fails to capture the personal nature of affective ties (Freeman, 2007). However, studies like Engebretsen's 2009 ethnography and Huang's (2015) notes on the relational nature of T/P relationship roles have manifested that Chinese queers develop new, creative relationship strategies and familial ties to survive the heteronormative social pressures and maintain face. The thesis will come to explore the idea of queer kinships in Mainland China and add to knowledge through a different demographic – that of rural and small-town queers rarely centred in research. It will also go on to demonstrate ways in which Chinese queers have found and continue to find and redefine kinship terms of their own for their chosen families, redefining the meanings of 'family' and kinship beyond the normative bonds of desire for same-sex marriage and aspirational nuclear family unit.

2.5 The researcher's position – Standpoint theory and the inside-outside problem

The paper has assessed the implications of the western gaze in the former chapters on questioning imported notions of 'good life' and assigning identities. In this subchapter, the gaze will turn to the researcher themselves, assessing the situational nature of their

knowledge, the underlying power dynamics with the researcher and their collaborators, as well as precautions taken in the project to address and minimize the power dynamics and hierarchies.

A pivotal theoretical approach in this project is an awareness and critical viewing of my research position as a white, Nordic researcher. The goal was to do research that would somehow connect with and benefit the communities studied, and to avoid the pitfalls of orientalism as defined by Edward D. Said in his ground-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978). Orientalism, once a neutral word for studies of the 'East', or the 'Orient', is now often used in Saidian terms as a fetishising, exoticising and infantilising the East through a white, western, lens[5]. While the East is the field and research subject of this research, orientalism and western superiority are notions the project actively seeks to avoid. This means not only questioning theories and stereotypes that may carry such notions, but also active introspection and awareness of the positionality – to remain aware of the researcher's position and privilege throughout the process, from interview situations to writing up the findings.

As a queer scholar doing work on Chinese queer/tongzhi communities, I am both an outsider – due to my Nordic upbringing, whiteness and foreign nationality – and an insider, a member of a queer community in Beijing. The insider-outsider problem in studying Chinese queer groups has been discussed in depth by the Chinese-American gender scholar Lucetta Yip Lo Kam. In her book *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (2013), Kam points out how her gender, ethnicity, identification with the lala community and language skills helped her in carrying out her research *on* and *in* Shanghai lala communities (Kam returns to and further assesses the topic in her article *Coming home, coming out: Doing Fieldwork in an Unfamiliar Homeland* (2015)). While I do not share neither ethnic identity nor citizenship with my interviewees, my queer identity, social networks and Mandarin skills granted me an easier access to a more diverse group of interviewees and seemingly helped them feel more comfortable – many interviewees at first expressed discomfort about the prospect of having to discuss their life experiences in English, and many of them wanted to

[5] It is to be noted that Said's original focus was on the field of Middle-Eastern studies – however, most of Said's thesis can be applied to East Asia, as similar exotification and fetishising of the 'Far East' (an expression which in itself positions East-Asia to the exotic 'faraway place' from the 'central' West) has occurred and continues to occur from Madame Butterfly to the representation of Asian characters as ninjas or kungfu masters, by default. The 'Orient', in itself, only exists in relation to the West, the 'Occident' – and the term is often applied confusingly and inconsistently to any cultures east of Europe.

discuss my coming-out experiences and compare them with theirs, perhaps both to point out differences in our cultures and to find common ground in our queerness.

Similar experiences of queerness as common ground establishing trust between researchers and interviewees has been recorded by Kam (2015, pp.179-180), Schroeder (2015, p.60) and Kong (2010, p.219) – all three discuss how queerness or tongzhi identity opens doors and gives access to communities that might not be open to cisgender and heterosexual researchers, while Kong also points out how the crossing categories of age, class, and other categories affect the dynamics in research situations (ibid.). It is noteworthy that Kong's observation is a direct link to the idea of intersectionality – how the intersections of our identities and realities affect our lives and interactions with others. Yet despite the differences, the shared queerness brought a certain mutual feeling of safety to the interviews. Indeed, we shared bonding moments over difficulties with nosy relatives and struggling to get recognition from parents – in a way, our worlds apart are, in fact, parallel to an extent.

My identities – or attributes ascribed to me – bestow upon me both assets and troubles in carrying out my research: my whiteness and Finnish passport grant me mobility, academic freedom and access to resources many Chinese scholars can unfortunately only dream of, while being a foreigner also limits my access to the people whose stories we perhaps are in the most dire need of hearing – those who might not speak much Mandarin, dare to go to LGBTQ+ -affiliated events, or mingle with people foreign researchers might have connections to. (I by no means imagine white foreigners being the best or only people who should carry out such research – but as several of my interviewees pointed out, for now foreigners are sometimes the only ones who can relatively safely carry out research on such topics.)

On the other hand, my queer identity grants me with excellent networks and relatively easy access to people to talk to – there often is a friend of a friend who is willing to share their story. Of course, these queer 'networks' simultaneously mean there is an undeniable influence of community gatekeepers at play, a typical case for such studies (a similar observation was made by Kam concerning her ethnography, for instance). While gatekeepers do, of course, create a filtered representation of the communities they gatekeep for, their presence is not an inherently problematic factor – after all, they are to thank for connecting people who might otherwise never stumble across each other (Moore, 2018). However, I try to remain critical of

the representativeness of my data sample, acknowledging how some of my interviewees might have been handpicked by well-connected, English-speaking[6] community members, while some decided to contact me based on the call for interviewees posted on chat groups.

Beverley Mullings (1999) argues that identities and power relations in cross-cultural interviews should be taken into consideration not only in how they shape the data to a certain direction, but also how the shifts in the power relations of insider-outsider identities create uncertainty. According to Mullings, this uncertainty will remain what she calls a 'residue' in any data gathered (Mullings, 1999). This problem of 'tracking' the shifts of identities and power relations perhaps makes simple, all-encompassing definitions and identities impossible: I may call myself a 'white' 'outsider' or a 'queer' 'insider', yet the complexity of insider-outsider identities and their shifts makes it impossible to define the influence of these factors in a way that would pinpoint them to the extent that their effect could somehow be 'neutralised' by some counter-measure while analysing the data, to attain a so called 'objective' or infallible truths. However, considering these shifts in a conscious way and observing the power relations and subjectivities present in the communications with collaborators ('interviewees') makes the privilege of the researcher, as well as the influence different identities and subjectivities have on the interview situation, visible, offering more nuanced readings and transparent research processes (Gorman-Murray et al, 2016).

The implication this has to the study is not to avoid terms like 'findings' completely – it is only to point out the imperfect nature of the data and, as Mullings puts it, to 'displace the authority of the author'. This is in line with the intersectional, non-westrocentric approach of the paper, and further, the feminist philosophy of science and queer theory, which at their core deny the existence of 'objective' truths (Browne & Nash, 2016). The study will, at best, describe people and their actions through the researcher's lens, which even the knowledge of one's subjectivity cannot remove from the equation. On the contrary, instead of aspiring to remove the researcher and their standpoint from the study, in this paper, the researcher's presence is made transparent through reflection and personal experiences, an attempt to close the gap between the researcher's and the 'object', rather seeing the research as a co-constructed story where we are both part of the creation of the narrative. This allows for 'failure' in conducting the interviews, as well – I was initially very worried about leading my

[6] I got help in finding interviewees from a (non-Mandarin-speaking) foreign person, who connected me with some the interviewees through 'gatekeepers'.

interviewees, or affecting the narrative – as if I could ever fully escape them.

Furthermore, failure in itself is very queer in nature, or, as Halberstam frames it in *Queer Art of Failure*, 'something queers do and have always done well' (p.3) – in a way failure, embracing it and denying the perfection in research process is something very queer in itself. Embracing the failure and emphasising how the interviews were rather conversations than research procedures allows for humanity and subjectivity of both the researcher and the interviewee. Seeing the interviews through the two-way influence we share as human beings also begs for transparency. In this paper, this has meant openly stating when an issue was raised by the interviewee themselves, and when they were directly asked about this. For example, the notion of *xiao* was part of the interview questions and explicitly brought up by the interviewer, which is relevant to the analysis on the importance of the term – perhaps it reflected the western interviewer's a priori conceptualisation of queer lives in China, rather than the experiences of the interviewees. These sort of complex questions follow through the research process, but are hopefully addressed to a satisfactory degree by the transparent, queer research practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

As discussed above, queer research theory and its application carried much weight throughout the research process – for queer feminist research, the transparency and feminist research practices need to follow through the whole process, from drafting the research questions, to carrying out the interviews, to storing the data, to analysis and publication. Queer feminist research goes deeper with its consideration for 'researcher's ethics' (Brydon-Miller, 2008), compelling the researcher to consider the motives and possible implications of each act done throughout the process and after it, and to remain reflective of their shortcomings (Brinkman, 2016, p.338). It ties strongly to the notion of 'activist research' or 'action research' – research that does actively and intentionally aim to change the research processes (and, modestly, the world) for the better, instead of 'pursuing truths'. It also means asking not only 'what' one researches, but also 'why' and 'how', and what outcomes might follow for the people and communities involved in the research, and whether or not it gives voices to the marginalised people the research focuses on (Brinkman, 2016, p.334).

For this paper, queer feminist research methods meant a number of things: for one, drafting theory and research questions that would be aware and critical of orientalist bias – formulating research questions and a perspective that would both avoid and critically analyse the unintentional and subconscious western arrogance on LGBTQ+ issues in non-western cultures and to avoid binaries such as western openness and progressiveness and the backwardness and secrecy of the other, binary of good versus bad life. It also meant remaining aware of the researcher's position and privilege in and out the actual interview situations; and additionally, seeing the research process as a collaboration and work with the individuals and their communities. The first two have been explored in above chapters: this one will delve deeper into the other observations of the queer feminist theory and practice in the paper.

Feminist methodology means that the research process would be viewed as a collaboration between the so-called 'subjects': that the data would be a construction of the conversations and interactions of two people, and that the interviewees would have part in shaping how the

data was gathered, what questions were asked, and how the data was used later on (Monk et al, 2003). It would mean that the 'interviewees' would rather be 'collaborators' (Gorman-Murray et al, 2016), people who had a voice in shaping the project, redirecting it, and would have access to the findings.

The collaborative feminist methodology shaped the research greatly: for instance, below is outlined one of the questions raised by one of the interviewees, Maoyi, that shifted the whole geographical focus of the study. Similarly, my interviewee Waltz pointed out how a lot of research on Chinese LGBTQ+ lives does not necessarily serve the community since the informants never see or hear what was eventually written about them – following this discussion, I promised to translate my main findings and send them back to Waltz, since she expressed hopes to view the findings and hopefully use them to develop the outreach and education program for rural queer women she and an organisation she is an active at are working on. Waltz's observation and the following conversation are at the gist of feminist action research, and, in my eyes, further proof of the need for feminist activist scholarly works in the field of sinology.

3.2 The process of data sampling – queer feminist methods in practice

Originally, my intention was to interview people from all four 'first-tier' cities – Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen – as I had networks to LGBTQ+ communities in many different cities, which made such a large scale of master's thesis project plausible. I also wanted to gather diverse data, where local difference would be taken into account. However, one of my interviewees and a friend, (at the time) Beijing-based artist Maoyi, pointed out that perhaps the cultural and social differences are not greatest between these cities – but between the different areas from which my interviewees had migrated to these big cities. The observation was important in shaping the direction of the study, as Maoyi – very clearly a collaborator, in line with the feminist collaborative methods (Gorman-Murray et al, 2016; Monk et al, 2003) – had pointed out a possible flaw in my research design, as well as a solution to better diversify the data. This, along with issues with finding time, led to me dropping Shenzhen from this project and deciding the greater diversity in background of the interviewees would actually be more important to gather diverse data.

While a lot of queer research and queer communities centre the (white) gay man (Binnie, 2007, p.34), this project focused on finding a diverse group of people to share their stories. In the end, the presentation of different queer identities was quite broad for such a small group of people; among the interviewees, there were self-identifying lala, gay, queer, pan, transgender, and non-binary persons, each looking at their experience through a different lens.

Since finding diverse interviewees was an important goal from the beginning, it is important to note that the sample of interviewees in this project is by no means a cross-section of Chinese LGBTQ+, queer or tongzhi individuals. However, feminist research need not form 'representative samples' – it can aim to give voices to the marginalised (Brinkman, 2016, p.334), deepen understanding of human condition (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.114) and to gain deep knowledge on an individual level (ibid., p.117)[7], all of which can be viewed as goals of this research project. Even from the small, eight-person sample of this study, several narratives arose, and more information was gained about the lives of rural-to-urban migrant queers, whose stories we know little about to date.

Most importantly, less so is this paper and representative sample of Chinese people who express their gender or sexual desire in non-conforming ways. This distinction of this group and self-identified 'queers' is rather important: people who define themselves as queer, LGBTQ+, or tongzhi were an easier target group to focus on, while it also left the right to define and name to the individuals themselves, instead of ascribing these nominators to them from the outside. It also adhered to the queer research philosophy of self-defined identities, as described by Jagose, and discussed above in the theory section.

The language philosophical reasons for using the word 'queer' in this study have been discussed earlier in the paper, but for this particular use, another consideration presented itself: safety. It was my (perhaps rather naïve) wish that 'ku', which can also mean 'cool', could get past possible algorithmic censorship easier than 'tongzhi', the colloquial use of which is rather established. Methodologically, this meant that in my call for participants, I posted in both Chinese and English on LGBTQ+, queer and tongzhi chat groups and asked for

[7] Hesse-Biber also points out (p.117) how qualitative methods and unstructured interviews can help feminist scholars to map out possible survey questions, thus feeding into quantitative research on the matter.

queer-identifying (kù 酷) people to contact me for interviews – hence, each interviewee should have felt that the term described their lived experience at least with sufficient accuracy. Of course, not everyone was the first hand in mediating the interview process. Some interviewees I found through mutual friends who heard about my project and thought about someone who fit the target group. Some of the interviewees identified themselves as belonging under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, some used the word tongzhi, while some used more descriptive terms: 'I am a woman who likes women', for instance – however, all of them recognised themselves in the term 'queer', the initial descriptor that made them agree to contact me for the interviews.

Furthermore, placing the focus of the study onto people who actively identified through their gender identity and/or sexual orientation was a way of creating data that could be compared to and discussed with the same terms as the surrounding public discourse paradigm. The shifts in attitudes, public policies and activism are most acutely observed through this explicit discourse – after all, many Chinese use these terms to define themselves, to demand rights, to discuss their lives and thus entered the concepts into the public discourse in Mainland China as well as the broader Chinese cultural sphere (e.g. Engebretsen, 2009; Kam, 2013; Chao, 2019).

Other than theoretically and methodologically, the decision to include only people who define themselves with the terms of queer/tongzhi/LGBTQ+ was a decision made out of realistic expectations regarding access. Undoubtedly, there exist many individuals who, for one reason of another – be it a personal, well thought-through choice, lack of access to resources discussing these terms, or any other reason – do not define themselves with these terms or publicly or privately engage with the queer/tongzhi/LGBTQ+ community. Access to these people would undoubtedly provide important insight into the lives of gender and sexual minorities in China, yet approaching people that belong to marginalised groups might place these people in danger and accidentally 'out' them i.e. enclose their orientation to the public, family or employer (Connell, 2018, p.129). This would be especially risky done by an openly queer, white foreigner, or even their fellow citizens engaged in queer circles – or in the very least it would show disregard to their choice to stay anonymous or simply away from these 'queer circles'. Access to these people is not necessarily easy even for the Chinese – for instance, a recent study by the Lala Salon (an NGO with a focus on queer women's issues) in Beijing, while carried out mainly by a cross-generational group of Chinese lalas, showed the

difficulty of accessing rural lala women, a member of the research team told me. Research with closeted, non-Mandarin-speaking, working class individuals requires different contacts, discreet communication, and often the use of interpreters – thus, as valuable as these voices would be for a truly diverse view on non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered and gender non-conforming China, these project had to leave these voices for future projects, perhaps carried out by someone else; hopefully, someone with research funding.

Following the collaborative feminist methodology and the queer theory approach of respecting self-identification, the definition of 'rural', and 'small-town' was left for the interviewees to define – after all, their expertise on these definitions is based on Chinese perspectives on the matter. In the end, my interviewees did contest my perception of 'small cities': even as I was aware that cities with populations exceeding that of my whole birth country – about 5.5 million – might be considered 'small' by Chinese standards, I was still surprised to hear one of my interviewees, a 28-year-old artist YY from Guangxi, calling her hometown with a population over 7 million, 'extremely small'. However, while relatively 'small' European cities like Brighton (with population under 200 000), and Amsterdam (below 1 million) are buzzing with queer subculture, many Chinese cities with multi-million populations do, according to the interviewees, lack queer subcultures, events and organisations, and have traditional, 'closed and provincial' (封闭), culture. To my interviewees, the perceived 'smallness' was more cultural than defined by actual size or population.

In terms of age, most of the interviewees were on their twenties or thirties – the youngest being 23, the oldest 40. With more resources – mainly, time in China – gathering a more cross-generational group of interviewees would have diversified the data to a greater extent. However, as will be discussed in the analysis section, the differences were less cross-generational and much more individual – perhaps, a small-scale qualitative research is not the ideal context to make such analysis, anyway.

Each of the interviewees originally came from a different province: Fujian, Guangxi, Guangzhou, Guizhou, Jiangxi, Liaoning, Inner Mongolia and Sichuan were all represented, making the set of cultural backgrounds and the data diverse in the way Maoyi had earlier suggested. Two of the interviewees were from ethnic minorities – that is, ethnic groups other than Han Chinese. The hometowns of my interviewees differed greatly not only by location,

but also by size: the smallest (a population of a few dozen) and the biggest (over 7 million) hometown appeared to be not only thousands of kilometres, but also a world apart.

The list of home provinces covered a lot of the Chinese map and many different regions: Dongbei (Northeast), Eastern China, Southern China, Central China, and the often unrepresented Western China – although the westernmost, minority-populated provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet were unfortunately not represented in the sample. Perhaps there should have been special effort on my part to find interviewees from these two provinces, as it would be very important to hear more queer voices from the westernmost China since these stories are very few. Some examples do exist, though, for instance that of Maira Erken's[8], a lesbian tomboy from Xinjiang – and hopefully in the future, more voices from these often underrepresented areas will be heard.

All interviews were carried out in Mandarin – while some of my interviewees were very fluent in English, some of them were initially anxious about the thought of having to discuss their lives in a language they were not fluent in. Additionally, it was essential to consistent analysis of the data that the interviews were all done in the same language: this would ease comparing the narratives, as well as the terminology the interviewees used to describe themselves and tell their stories. Language needed special observation for reasons other than the ease of analysis – the choice of words in communication, names to be printed, and other security concerns were also an integral part of the research process.

3.3. Safety concerns

In accordance with ethical, feminist research philosophy, the safety of the interviewees was, of course, an important aspect of doing feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2007), especially as the work was focused on oppressed identities and people doing activist work within a hostile regime where activists face continuous harassment (e.g. Fan, 2015; Schroeder, 2015).

[8] Maira Erken (2016) for Sixth Tone: http://www.sixthtone.com/news/789/love-lowlands-muslim-lesbian-tomboy Erken is, similar to the 'target group' of the study, from a rural area and lived in Shanghai at the time the article was written. Maira Erken is a pen name.

Many of the interviews took place around the Pride week in Shanghai, which saw several venue changes due to security concerns and problems with officials, a problem often observed by community actives (Fan, 2015). In addition, I knew my partner's communications were monitored, and several of my friends had been harassed for their activism in the past – it did not feel like a stretch of imagination that I might attract attention as well, if I strayed too far out to the realm of 'activism'. I remembered an activist I once interviewed calling me out for not having a passcode on my phone where I stored the interview, and a friend's mail coming to her door, already opened. Hence, taking precautions felt only reasonable, if not a basic requirement if one wanted to assert to do research that took the safety and wellbeing of the interviewees – and the researcher – seriously.

The first step of the safe research practise was finding the interviewees without disclosing too much information while giving *enough* of it – to address that the queer/ku'er identity, as well as the rural-to-urban migrant aspect were relevant. Posting in groups and asking the interviewees to contact me instead of contacting them was another safety precaution which could be taken to avoid outing people by contacting them (Connell, 2018). Aside from two friends I knew were interested beforehand, this was what I did – instead of contacting anyone, they contacted me, or mutual friends asked for their consent before I approached them. In contacting the interviewees through social media, I kept the messages short and non-specific, but informative enough to get informed consent from the interviewees, avoiding content that could be considered political or critical of the regime: rather, the calls for interviewees were formulated simply along the lines of 'looking for queer friends from small cities or countryside to talk about their experiences in living big cities'. I asked each of them before meeting up if it was okay to record the what we 'discussed' (谈) - in a way, the whole process was a negotiation between what was clear and informative enough to give the interviewees the change to give informed consent and what was safe enough to sound like friendly chats and not attract attention.

Once we met face to face (or in two instances, in Skype), I explained the whole project to detail: how I would store data; my plans of perhaps publishing an article based on the findings of the thesis; that the interviewees would reserve the right to pull out of the project at any point; that their names would be written in whatever form they themselves chose or that I could change their personal information to make them unrecognisable. I also explained the data would be kept in no devices with internet connection while in China, and be transferred

to a thumb drive once I got to my laptop, that I would use passcodes, and look after my belongings carefully. Together, we deemed these precautions sufficient.

Upon meeting, it was evidently very clear to the interviewees that the conversation would be in direct relation to their queerness, but what stories they decided to share took different forms in each semi-structured interview. Most were open, even bold in discussing their grievances and happinesses – perhaps due to trust, perhaps due to having calculated the risks: some said they were not very concerned over people recognising them, some expressed worry over colleagues or relatives finding out if their birth name would be published.

Each of the interviewees was offered the choice of leaving their name out of the paper or choosing an alternative name – each one of them chose to omit their given name, and opted for alternative names or nicknames. Many of them explained that this was done to maintain anonymity from parents, relatives, employers and colleagues. Meanwhile, some of them have a visible social media and/or activist presence using these chosen names, and their choice of name for the paper cannot be viewed as seeking complete anonymity. However, as one of the interviewees explained, parents or relatives are highly unlikely to stumble upon media where they used alternative names or make the connection between their relative and their self-chosen, foreign-language name.

Respecting the safety of the interviewees, however, would not come to mean patronising them or removing their right to take calculated risks in using this platform – as long as they had enough information to give consent to my use of the information: each one of them was told that while this paper in itself would most probably end up buried in online archives, I have plans to publish the findings as an article somewhere along the road. This meant that some of the collaborators took some calculated risks in their more critical takes on the Chinese society, and perhaps some of them might be recognisable from the names they chose to use – these, however, were their individual, informed choices to be respected, especially as one of the main rationales of the paper was to platform and tell *their* stories and collaborate with them. Waltz and Dawson, specifically, said they found it good that a foreign person would do research on a topic that would be, if not impossible as they said, then at least very challenging for Chinese scholars to do due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed. Hence, calculated risks were taken by everyone involved, but with information, consent, and ongoing negotiation, and – hopefully – future cooperation.

3.4. Accumulative and iterative approach to data gathering

Conducting semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data was part the research plan from the beginning of the research project, and this was what I carried out during my field work periods in China in autumn 2017 and summer of 2019. This choice of interview type allows the researcher to ask particular questions and focus on certain topic – such as identity and social roles in this project – while it allows for new questions, changes, and emerging topics (Hesse-Biber, 2007, pp.115-116). However, an important input to the research methods came from Cecilia Milwertz, a senior researcher at NIAS, the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. She suggested that instead of conducting all interviews with the exact same interview guide, I should rather apply iterative or accumulative approaches to the research data, learning from each interview and the stories I was told – an approach that proved very fruitful as the project went on.

The accumulative/iterative approach and the queer methodology – learning from the process, embracing failure and stumbling, and letting the interviewees lead the conversations – did change the direction of this research drastically. While my original research topic was along the lines of 'How do rural/small city background tongzhi negotiate different social roles and pressures in while visiting their hometown, compared to their lives in the first-tier cities they have migrated to?' – an appropriately long-winded academic headline – the first few interviews redirected my attention to kinship, definitions of family and close relationships, reshaping the study in a way I did not expect, but did embrace. This new focal point will be further discussed in the next chapter. I did, however, want to explore the negotiating of identities alongside the new research question: after all, the queer familial ties and alternative forms of kinship were, to many of my interviewees, shaped and informed by the pressures they felt from their natal family.

3.5. The interview process – theory in practice

3.5.1 Emerging questions – refocusing the study

While I did begin the interview process in Autumn 2017, with the idea of elaborating on Engebretsen's 2009 ethnography and focusing on the process of 'negotiating' identities and social pressures in queer Chinese lives, during the interviewing process, my focus and interest shifted. Many interviewees ended up, instead of discussing their relationship and struggles from expectations from their parents, describing novel understandings of 'family' and kinship. In accordance with the accumulative, queer approach to the data (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Gorman-Murray et al, 2016), I decided the follow the questions and narratives emerging from the data, and redirect the focus of the study to kinship and novel familial ties – after all, social pressure on queer lives in Confucian societies has been written about to exhaustion[9], yet studies on queer kinships in China are few[10].

In practice, the queer, reflective and accumulative approach meant that I could follow new themes emerging from the interviews and brought up by the collaborators. After talking to HC, I started to consider the differences between different first-tier cities, the meaningfulness of migrating to 'open' first-tier cities from rural places, and the meaning of queer communities to my collaborators. A talk with Maoyi (whom I talked with after the first interview, off-the-record on a park bench with beers) encouraged me to look into areal differences in the home provinces and their culture in relation to sexuality, gender, and gender expression – which led into interesting conversations about locality and areal differences between provinces, and small cities versus little villages (these conversations are mapped out in chapter 4.2.2, 'Areal differences'). Similarly, after talking to Dawson who repeatedly stressed the meaning of her friends as her kin, the kinship question entered my interview

[9] The examples are plenty, but for an overview, see e.g. The Guardian: *Why China's LGBT hide their identities at Lunar New Year* https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51199309 accessed 17:02 19.1.2020 The Lancet: D*iscrimination against LGBT populations in China* https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(19)30153-7/fulltext accessed 16:55 19.1.2020 and Adamczyk, Amy; Yeh-sin Alice Cheng (2014): *Explaining Attitudes about Homosexuality in Confucian and Non-Confucian nations: Is there a 'cultural' influence?*

[10] It is noteworthy that towards the end of this research process, in January 2020, Hong Kong University Press published a short volume by John Wei on their Queer Asia book series, titled*: Queer Chinese Cultures and Mobilities: Kinship, Migration, and Middle Classes*, which clearly feeds to the same literature on queer China with a focus on queer kinship and migration. Of course, the publication of one volume does not mean the topic has been exhausted with research, but might instead speaks to the topicality of the matter.

design. While the interviews remained semi-structured, I had certain topics I wanted to cover, and new questions were added as the project progressed and new views were brought up by the collaborators. This follows the queer feminist methodology of in-depth interviews in qualitative research, as described by Hesse-Biber, (2007, pp.115-117) and Gorman-Murray et al (2016).

It was specifically interesting to me to explore kinship and intimate/familiar ties in the context of the Chinese, Confucian and rather family-oriented society. The need for belonging is of course a rather universal human characteristic, but sinophone societies make for a unique context (of course, it could be said that any society provides a unique context). This was also evident in the interviews, where the interviewees did discuss the importance of family – be it the one you were born to or a chosen one – in detail and elaboration. This did identify a gap in literature, as I was not (at the time) able to find scholarly works explicitly working on queer kinship in China, even though works such as Engebretsen's do relate to the topic. The importance of family, both natal and alternative, was so explicit in my collaborators' accounts, that the topic felt well worth pursuing, and did indeed offer nuanced new understandings of Chinese queer lives.

3.5.2 The insider-outsider problem in practice

The insider and outsider identities in this research project have been discussed earlier in the paper, but perhaps require more dissecting in discussing their possible influence to the interview processes themselves – there were some aspects of the interviews that were clearly affected by the interviewer being a Chinese-speaking, white foreigner. While speaking Mandarin made it easy to find interviewees regardless of their knowledge of the English language, I could sometimes detect attempts to make the language they spoke 'more accessible' to me, a foreigner, or *laowai,* whose Chinese, while perhaps somewhat fluent, is far from native*:* for instance, some of them would supply an English translation right after using a Chinese term they seemed to think I might not recognise.

This seemed to be especially true with some identity-related terminology, like 'non-binary' (非性别) and 'pansexual' (范性恋), which my interviewees were often quick to translate

regardless of whether or not I expressed confusion or not understanding – in fact, I rather felt my interviewees did not often know whether or not I was following, and based their perceptions on whether or not I understood on their notions of 'easy' and 'difficult' words (when in fact, I struggled much more with rather simple words such as 'stepdad', while terminology around sexuality and gender, including slang, felt rather familiar).

The visible attempt by many of the interviewees to use 'easier' language might suggest that I should not draw very stark conclusions from the choices of words used by my interviewees, or specifically, their choice to use either Chinese or 'global' words – or perhaps, following Mulligan (1999), I should simply recognise the fallibility and subjective nature of any findings made here, and be satisfied with that. However, I did not want to skip the analysis of their choices on terminology entirely, and a short analysis of the terminology – elaborating on the discussion on *queer* versus *tongzhi* by Engebretsen and Schroeder (2015) as well as Fan/Cui (2015), is included in the analysis section, before moving on to the discussion on family, belonging, and kinship building.

4. ANALYSIS

In the analysis section of this paper I will look into the findings from my interviews in two separate sections: one focusing on the lives and experiences of my interviewees in their hometowns, one on their lives in the big first-tier cities they have relocated to. What this two-fold approach allows is at first glance a comparative view that allows us to look at the relevance of the rural/small town background of the interviewees – something that is a pivotal factor in why the stories of the interviewees are new and important to tell in the first place. It allows for a nuanced view of how the collaborators become the persons they are today, how they relate to themselves, their past, future, and their natal and chosen families.

This separation should not be viewed as a strict binary, however, and as the analysis will show, neither is it a clean-cut story of finding happiness in the big, free city after a provincial, oppressive past. In fact, it is rather a queer story of how the transcendence can happen anywhere – even if the first-tier cities might provide a more likely chance for it – in how Dawson found a supportive father figure from her family friend, or how HC experienced greater freedom in another first-tier metropolis than her first big hometown, not only by leaving the rural village she was born in. It was an important concern from the beginning of this research process to avoid binaries – of negative versus positive stories, of succeeding versus failing – and the analysis section, even if split in two, will show how there is both happiness and comfort in the hometown lives, and feelings of hopelessness and failure in the shining lights of the first-tier metropoles – and of course, everything in between in both of them.

Notes on language and terminology

As discussed in the methods sections, all my interviewees had recognised themselves from the term 'ku' to some extent. What interested me, however, was how exactly my interviewees would define themselves, given an open question about how they identify (rèntóng 认同). I initially expected there to be a clear generational difference, even split, in the terms chosen for self-identification – however, many the interviewees had a broad scale of identifiers that escaped differentiation by age or any other clear signifier or category. In fact, many of the

interviewees preferred to *not* use single-word signifiers like 'queer' or 'tongzhi', but opted instead for more descriptive language that perhaps carried less connotations I was not familiar with – perhaps, or most probably, words like 'queer' have different connotations to different people and in different cultures, perhaps even in different cities. While the interviewees might have recognised themselves as 'queer'/'ku'er', many of them did not choose the word to describe themselves when asked to identify themselves freely, with their own words. Instead, expression such as 'female homosexual', 'a woman who likes women', 'likes women', were among the descriptors used. Most of them would not use terms like lala to talk about themselves, even if categorically they could belong under these umbrella terms.

There were some among them who opted for single-word identifiers, however; Maoyi and Cleo, identifying as queer and non-binary, respectively, chose these globally used terms to describe themselves. It is noteworthy that both Maoyi and Cleo had received university education, and were in their early-to-mid-twenties, among the youngest ones of the interviewees, as well as actively involved in cosmopolitan LGBTQ+ scenes of their big new home cities. Their involvement with foreign activists or their choice of 'international' terms to describe themselves, however, should not be viewed as undermining or abandoning their Chineseness – scholars such as Liu (2010) have analysed in detail the potential of applying queer theory and 'queerness' to the Chinese context, rather expanding the meaning of queerness by these novel meanings. Following Liu, I did not want to view the application of 'global' terms by my interviewees as something essentially not Chinese, but rather, view them as new meanings altogether; the 'global' terms in a Chinese context. Maoyi also specifically stressed the meaning of the Chinese context to their activist work: 'I wanted to move to Europe, but I don't know the fight there. I don't feel it's my fight, and there I would have a different identity [of a Chinese immigrant].' Involvement in activist work that could be viewed as a part of a global movement should not be taken as turning one's back to one's own culture – queerness, or queer activism, is not inherently western: for Maoyi, their queerness and activism was rather inherently Chinese, their 'fight' tied to appropriating 'queer' into the Chinese society, yet another one of 'queer's' countless 'glocal' reincarnations.

It was also interesting to witness what stories it was that my interviewees chose to tell – the methods chapter opened up the question of what sort of stories people would want to share when given considerably free hands with the narrative. After the interviews, the question remained: were there stories the interviewees narrated perhaps ones they thought a foreign

scholar would want to hear? Perhaps to some extent, there were: not surprisingly, considering the research topic, many seemed to stress the negative experiences in their hometown, or tell stories about the queer struggles in a specifically Chinese context. However, other narratives surfaced as well: the understanding family friend and father figure in the parent's generation; and the shared experiences and bonding over similar queer struggles on almost opposite sides of the globe. As a whole the stories escaped simple binaries and expectations – even if some of them were mirrored, perhaps due to expectations of what the interviewer wanted to hear – and transcended to a multitude of lived experiences queer lives with local and global influences.

Above is one attempt on dissecting possible reasons for why the interviewees chose certain terms to describe themselves and their stories. However, it is but a scratch on the surface of the issue, which would beg more studying and a clear focus perhaps on the single issue of language and terminology from the start of the research process. While language and its use in self-identification and the different connotations different terminologies carry is one of the aspects this paper analyses, more work on why certain terms are chosen in the Chinese cultural context would be worth pursuing: there has, of course, been scholarly work and discussion on queer/tongzhi terminology in China, among others by Huang (2015), Fan/Cui (2015) and Engebretsen and Schroeder (2015). Worth researching would be first-hand accounts by Chinese queer people on why they choose these terms, as a lot of the scholarly work rather draws on the analysis of the researcher. This, of course, is something I have not entirely avoided myself – perhaps, the reasonings behind choosing certain terms could have been intentionally pursued in the interviews. However, perhaps the broader question of *why* would be best pursued as a topic for another research project altogether.

4.1 'Closed and provincial' hometowns?

The small towns and rural villages my interviewees were from did, for many of them, symbolise a past they had left behind to flourish in the first-tier cities they had since migrated to in order to look for openness and tolerance, and better opportunities. This chapter will explore how the interviewees' intersecting identities affected their lived experiences, their accounts on the difficulties of living and surviving in the small places they grew up in, and the

ties they still held to their old homes through families, relatives and friends. Furthermore, it will go on to show how the simplicity of reading the rural as negative and oppressive and urban as free and tolerating misses out on the nuanced realities of queer lives in both realms – in the stories, there were good and nurturing qualities in the rural, and challenging and intolerant in the urban. As could be expected, the lived realities escaped clean-cut binaries, showing how the rural and urban worlds tied together to create unique identities and experiences.

4.1.1 Intersection of queerness, gender, and queer bodies

'It's not the surgeries that are most painful for trans people, it's the relationship with your parents.'

-K

While discussing identity markers such as 'tongzhi' or 'queers' might at first seem to shift the focus into abstract debates on language, the repercussions of these identities and realities were sometimes very practical to my interviewees, reaching onto the realm of their physical bodies and material wellbeing. It was here that the intersectional approach showed its essence, in conversations about how markers like locality, sexuality, queer embodiment and gender entangled together in their lived experiences.

As has been discussed above, this paper is by no means the first to discuss intersections of socioeconomic class or gender with sexuality: Rofel's (2007) discussions on 'money boys' connected class with sexuality; similarly, Engebretsen's ethnography (2009) outlined the intersection of gender and sexuality in the case of expectations informed by *xiao,* on how their lala interviewees as daughters had higher expectations of caring for their aging parents. However, this paper delves into new territory by consciously looking at several factors through the intersectional lens, the intersectional approach carrying throughout the analysis.

The findings of the preceding scholarly work did, however, provide a backdrop to compare the experienced recorded with. For instance, similar influence of gender that was recorded by

Engebretsen (2009) was brought up by my interviewees – for example, Dawson, a 24-year-old painter and tattoo artist originally from Guizhou, cited her mother telling her that studying hard for a degree would be the *only way* for her (a daughter) to gain her father's respect. Her father's preferential treatment towards sons was also manifested financially – while Dawson did not receive financial support from her father, her male cousin did. Dawson felt that the love of parents does not come without conditions: one has to be obedient and cited an example of the conditional nature of parents' love: 'if you are gay, your father will not pay for your university'.

Money, then, presented itself as a vessel of the parents' control over their children and their queer bodies, manifesting how socio-economics played into the precarity of the queer interviewees. While to K and Dawson money – or the lack of it – was a mode of parental control queers experienced, to HC, a 25-year-old NGO founder, her financial independence was exactly what allowed her certain freedoms, as her parents resisted her quitting university:

'They were worried about me not having money to support myself, but I had a job -- I found an NGO myself, the Trans Center, but they couldn't say anything... they didn't have the means to support me economically, so they couldn't say anything.'

HC had chosen to – and had the possibility, due to her financial independence – to ignore her family members telling her she should 'stop being feminine', because they felt she was 'a boy'. She also said, despite of her parents 'hoping she would marry and have kids', that she would not do these things only because her parents wanted her to.

The parents' desire to control the queer bodies of their children manifested the family biopolitics of queer bodies as Kong (2010) has described them: the healthy, reproductive and heterosexual bodies as an ideal the parents geared their children towards. In the Chinese society, the control parents have over their adult children and their bodies reaches beyond the economic, however – the hukou book, which one needs to renew passport and to register for social welfare services and of which there is one copy for the whole family (Lu et al, 2019), is often kept in the house of the parents, affecting the mobility of adult children and requiring them to stay in reasonably good terms with their parents.

Queer bodies are specifically vulnerable to parental control: with parents, coming out might

lead to falling out, and at worst, not only reduced mobility by a loss of passport, but institutionalisation: Dawson cited, with mild horror, a case of a lala couple, one of which disappeared upon coming out to her parents. Later on, the girlfriend found out her partner had been admitted to conversion therapy. 'It's really scary', she added, explaining how the fear of being locked up made it scary for some Chinese queer people to return home for holidays. We then went on to discuss how conversion therapy was not only a Chinese phenomenon, but how similar 'scary stories' of controlling parents emerged from around the globe, the East and West alike – while perhaps here parental control 'with Chinese characteristics', conversion therapy and the like should, of course, not be viewed as an uniquely Chinese phenomenon. It is noteworthy, however, how this aspect of control over queer bodies ties onto the notions of xiaoshun, and the family biopolitics.

Another interviewee, K, a trans woman originally from Sichuan, told that her parents much preferred boys, and that the pressure for daughters specifically to provide grandchildren was heavy. For K, she felt, the relationship with her parents was more complex still due to her transness – in her home village, parents preferred boys, and what they perceived as a 'loss of their son' was a big battle of wills between her and her father. She described how difficult the conversations over her reassignment surgery has been due to her needing her parents' approval and economic means to go through with it. 'It's not the surgeries that are most painful to trans people, it's the relationship with your parents', she summarised.

K described in detail her confrontations with her father, who resisted her reassignment surgery adamantly and only budged after K hurt herself and ended up in a hospital. K cited her father's strong preference towards sons, and her parents' worry over her being viewed as a 'pervert', as well as their daughter being 'sick' and having gotten ideas from 'wrong type' of friends as reasons for them to resist her decision. It was specifically the physical alteration to K's body that became the battleground. In the end, K accounted how she finally promised her father to 'behave well', to wear men's clothes when visiting home, and to avoid stirring problems, if only her father gave her permission to go forward with her reassignment surgery.

For K, as well as Cleo, a Shanghai-based non-binary university student, the intersection of sexual orientation and gender, and their effect in their life was entangled together – this is, of course, one of the basic notions of the theory of intersectionality: intersecting oppressions and othernesses cannot be looked at completely separately, but they inform each other. As in the

case of Ts, the sexual orientation and gender identity often intersect in ways that escape western terminology – for instance, even though Waltz defined herself as a female homosexual, her most evident experiences of discrimination or harassment were manifested in being chased out of women's bathroom for presenting masculine. Similarly, Cleo felt that their non-binary trans identity and homosexuality were both equally difficult for their parents to digest and could not tell which one was the bigger problem in their relationship that was turning 'worse and worse': in addition, Cleo currently identified as pansexual, but could not come out to their parents, because they felt it would only confuse them more. They also felt intimidated by the notion of going back home for the holidays, describing how 'scary' it would be if their whole family and relatives would confront them. As a result, they had not returned home to spend their New Year's holidays, first time ever.

Out of the collaborators, only Maoyi defined themselves only as 'queer' when asked about their identity, both in terms of gender and sexual orientation: the boundary between sexual orientation and gender was something not all of the interviewees chose to define and for this reason – and in line with the intersectional approach – gender and sexuality are something that are looked through this lens of their entanglement.

4.1.2 Redefining the meaning of xiao

'If you take care of your parents only in the way they want you to, and get married, have children, etc., you will hurt yourself, and others. If you enter a sham marriage because of your parents, isn't that hurtful to other people? This is a wrong way to be xiaoshun--'

- Martin

To some of my interviewees *xiao*, or filial piety, was manifested and redefined through novel forms or caring for one's parents. When explicitly asked about what xiao means to them, Cleo, for instance, described how they consider taking care of one's own self first to be prerequisite for caring for others:

'Oh dear, I haven't really thought about it, I don't agree with the notion [of xiaoshun] that much: If you're not the kind of you your parents want you to be, then you're not xiaoshun. I think, if you take responsibility for yourself, only then can you help others. Not by doing everything your parents tell you to do.'

Martin, a welfare program manager in his thirties, reflected the notion of taking care of oneself as an important part of being able to take care of others, and disputed marriage as something a *xiaoshun* child should do for their parents. *Xinghun* was something that many of the interviewees expressed distaste at, but Martin went as far as to call it a wrong way of being filial:

'If you take care of your parents only in the way they want you to, and get married, have children, etc., you will hurt yourself, and others. If you enter a sham marriage because of your parents, isn't that hurtful to other people? ***This is a wrong way to be xiaoshun****, one really needs to think about this.'* (emphasis mine)

Similarly, Waltz rejected the notion of traditional xiao, even criticising the performative nature of contemporary expressions of xiao:

'I love my parents in my own way, but they have their own standards, which is one reason I have no contact with my family. There are many things you're supposed to do for them to see. Many people buy things for their parents and put pictures in their WeChat moments, but I refuse to do this sort of thing. I love them, I return home without making a big deal out of it.'

To Waltz, then, the xiao of the social media era takes performative forms that have little to do with love, but rather, signalling traditional Chinese family virtues to one's social networks – taking happy pictures with parents around Chinese New Year's, or posting pictures of expensive gifts to broadcast to people how filial one is. She then explicitly separates these performative forms of xiao from *love,* real care for one's parents, even if their relationship is complex and they have little contact outside of Waltz returning home to Dongbei for CNY or to take care of her parents every few months. Here, Waltz also illuminates how socio-economical class and wealth tie onto the performativity of face/mianzi, as discussed in the theory section – money perhaps cannot buy love, but it can, in some situations or on your

WeChat moments, buy you a *performance* of love and filial piety. Here, material capital is traded for social capital – here, too, money and economic stability never leave the equation for queer persons, the intersection of wealth, sexuality and gender shaping queer lives and money presenting a way to 'buy one's way out' of difficulties that could rise from nonconforming forms of gender and sexuality. It is noteworthy that K begrudged her lack of economic means as one of the factors of her not being able to present feminine – to her, money would have been a way to freedom of gender expression, even though she seemed to present having money to have plastic surgeries as aspirational, while Waltz openly criticised 'purchasing' social capital through a performative interpretation of xiao.

To the interviewees, xiaoshun was closely tied to caring for ones parents, and they addressed and then *disputed* the traditional understanding of xiao, instead making up their own understanding of it and realising it through the acts of care and love towards their parents. Some, like Cleo, seemed to retire the whole concept of xiao, emphasising *caring for* one's parents instead. Meanwhile to some of them, like Martin and Waltz, it was not that queer children could not be xiaoshun or that the notion of xiao should be retired altogether – rather, the traditional understanding of it required retiring: the performativity, the obligatory marriage, producing grandchildren or obeying the parents. They created novel definitions of xiao, ones that instead centred loving and caring for one's parents, making love and care into the defining factors of xiao.

4.1.3 Alternative familial ties

It is not uncommon for queers to build alternative families outside of one's natal family, or to turn to other parental figures around their parent's age for emotional support, especially if the parents reject you for your sexuality or gender – for myself, for instance, my aunt has been a sort of stepmother, who has supported me when my own parents struggled with my queerness. This does not mean the relationship with one's parents would not be cordial – I am very close with my parents, especially my mother, but keep experiencing a lack of understanding of my queerness. Many of the interviewees narrated similar stories, where their queerness had pushed them further away from their parents: one of the collaborators, YY, described how her mother was so close they were 'like friends' and 'like sisters', who could talk about 'anything

at all' – except her pansexuality. To many, their sexuality took tacit, unspoken forms around their parents and relatives, even if the relationships were otherwise cordial.

However, parental figures can exist outside the natal family. Dawson described how, instead of her father, she built a filial relationship with a family friend, whom she described as a sort of *gandie*, an 'adoptive father' or 'godfather'. Dawson described how this *gandie* was her main father figure and only one among her circle of family and relatives she felt understood her. 'He knows I'm homosexual – after I came out after starting university, he really wanted to understand, he went out to find resources, read on the topic... he's the only one among my relatives who understands.'

Adopting familial terms of relating to one another is another way my interviewees constructed their chosen families, beyond *gandie*. Waltz was the one who most illuminated this kind of alternative kinship building:

'Friends are my kin, my closest family (qinren), we are a family[11] *- I use filial terms with them: my younger friend is my 'little sister', and her girlfriend I call my 'meifu' (one's sister's husband).'* (emphasis mine)

Engebretsen (2013) has also described how two T-identifying friends of theirs used *xiongdi*, 'brother', to refer to one another, and also notes that the practice is a common one between T's (p.62). This particular term of familiarity then asserts not only the filial relationship between T's, but also co-constructs and validates their masculinity. Lalas apply filial terms more broadly, as well – P, the descriptor for feminine lalas, comes from *laopo*, a colloquial term for 'wife'. Of course, one should be cautious of reading such terms as direct signifiers for an experienced 'familial' bond, but it is particularly interesting that such terminology holds such a strong ground in a society where the meaning of family is so strong and prevalent. It should be noted, of course, that Chinese people often call complete strangers 'brother', 'sister', or 'uncle', but this colloquial use is a far cry from the tender way with which lalas call each other 'husband' and 'wife'. Huang (2015) proposes that 'For lalas, face [mianzi] enables a relational understanding of gender roles that recognizes gender difference

[11] Orig. '朋友是我的亲人，我们是一个家庭' *'Péngyǒu shì wǒ de qīnrén, wǒmen shì yī gè jiātíng'*

and allows for role changes, providing a sense of authenticity that does not rely on inner depth.' (p.116) Thus, the husband/wife or T/P dynamic could be viewed as a sort of role play that plays on the social hetero norm without defining the inner essence of the subjects – the T/P lala couple is not a heterosexual couple, but can play with the dynamic and the family relationship that the terms husband/wife carry.

Queer kinship was not built only through speech, however: it was through actions that friends became kin, the 'closest family' to Waltz, and 'most important people' in Dawson's life: to them, friends did a lot of what one would expect from family – unconditional love and support, emotional support in the time of crisis, and economical support when parents would not offer any. Some of them expressed the 'strategic sensitivity' (Engebretsen & Schroeder, 2015, p.12) in relation to discussing their queerness with their parents, maintaining a tacit identity that still made economic support and cordial familial ties possible. However, for many, friends were the main source of social support network: the precarity of queer people and their dependency on parents that might only support you financially if you are filial, then, becomes a bond of mutual support, an alternative family where the natal family might fail or fall short of being supportive. For many of the interviewees, there was a juxtaposition of one's parents' contingent support and understanding and the love and support of one's friends that was viewed as unconditional and unwavering.

Of course, queer communities have been and continue to be both emotional and economical safety nets for many queers, and in the time of internet, offer a global platform to fundraising for everything from rent to top surgeries. Not unlike in China: I have myself pitched in on a fundraiser for to pay salaries to the employees of a Mainland Chinese Trans Center and cooked community kitchen dinners to support in a queer commune in Beijing – there is an affinity between queers that does transcend nationality and locality: we are, in a sense, a very large family. However, this sort of affinity is perhaps exactly the kind of kinship that, as Freeman put it, 'collapses' into the term 'community' – and possibly deserves to collapse. While some of the people in these communities are family to me, and each other, there are different kinships going on under the surface: would we all, given we are economically able to, help a community member in need? Certainly – this is the affinity between us. Yet the kinship, the *family*, Waltz and Dawson speak of goes far beyond queer affinity and sympathy, reaching onto the realm of deeply personal, to people who accept you for who you are beyond blood, even when your blood does not, the water thicker than blood. These are the people one

would share their home, food, funds and secrets with, and, as the discussion ahead will show, one's future.

4.2 'Inclusive and open' city life?

4.2.1 Migrating to first-tier cities

In discussing reasons for moving to first-tier cities, the words 'inclusivity' (包容性, which could also be translated to 'tolerance') and 'openness' (开放) were mentioned by most interviewees, while their rural or small-city hometowns were described as 'dull and monotonous' (单调) , 'traditional', and 'closed and provincial' (封闭). Of course, as discussed earlier, the 'smallness' of a Chinese city is highly relative – some of these 'small cities' have a population of a small European country. True to the method of self-defined identities, the interviewees each defined themselves as having a 'small-city' or 'rural' background, and all described their hometowns as less desirable places to live, especially with their queerness.

There was, however, a difference in the perception of small cities versus rural villages – even if the smallness was clearly subjective, and both tiny villages and cities with multimillion population were described as 'closed and provincial'. Some from slightly bigger cities did not completely abandon hope for their hometown – Dawson described how, while void of explicitly queer events, in her hometown one could still 'find like-minded friends and go out' and that 'the situation was getting better with her generation'. Dawson then viewed her hometown as not lacking hope or as an unbearable place to live, but did contrast this with big cities that have 'options' of LGBTQ+ related events and venues. HC, originally from a tiny village in Guangdong province, had a much darker image of the village she grew up in:

"It was very chauvinistic, very patriarchal – girls were discriminated against, they were unfair towards girls, girls did not have opportunities to receive education.. They would say things like 'you won't study, because you're a girl'—I refuse to be identified as a local at that place by others.'

For many of them, the move to a first-tier city marked a shift in their identity and/or self-expression, as well as a possibility to be more open about their sexuality. Like activist Chao Xiaomi (Chao, 2019), many of the interviewees emphasised how the move into the big city and becoming a part of a queer community had also created a chance for a different *becoming:* who they were themselves.

It was Martin's understanding that the struggle of most Chinese queers was three-fold: there was self-acceptance, family pressure, and living in the (heteronormative) society. In the interviews, the collaborators reflected how all three were alleviated by the move to a first-tier city. HC told how after moving to Guangzhou, the culture and tolerance were truly different, since Guangzhou was a home to people from various places, speaking a multitude of languages, but most importantly, she narrated how attending classes on gender at the university had 'helped her find herself' and understand her gender identity. K and YY also expressed how the pressure inflicted on them by the expectation of xiao affected them less in Shanghai. According to YY, living in a big city allowed her to live her life more freely and be together with whom she wanted to – 'If I was in a small town, I have no idea (how it would be)', she said. Some of them, like Martin, considered moving away to an 'inclusive' metropolis like Hong Kong or New York City, while some, like Dawson, said it felt more important to be where their friends and social safety networks were.

Of course, the shift in one's identity or expressions of it is not necessarily always about the change from a small town to a bigger one. The general change of scenery, social circles, and the major life change that comes with it are also likely to bring about the initiative – for instance, trans activist Chao Xiaomi refers to getting the courage to finally 'be herself' and wear women's clothes upon moving to Beijing, yet she moved there from Shanghai, another first-tier city (Chao, 2019), that was described by many of my interviewees as 'open' and 'embracing', and in fact has more Pride events than the northern capital, where the authorities often try to curb (Fan, 2015) LGBTQ+ -related events from happening.

4.2.2 Online communities and queer families

For queer people, friends and community are often not only company and family, but peer groups where to discuss and negotiate identities and share information on topics that might be under-researched or otherwise hard to attain information about, such as information on the effects of hormone replacement therapy or other bodily alterations for trans community (Stryker, 2008). As an example of this, HC recounted several points in her life where support,

information and encouragement from her friends or her queer communities had been pivotal points in her exploration of her gender expression and negotiation, as well as shifts in her gender identity - even prerequisites of her finding herself at all.

However, academics such as Stryker (2006), Whittle (2006) and Raun (2016) have also discussed the meaning of internet platforms such as chat forums, video services and other social media as place where queer communities can come together and build and reconstruct their communities. According to authors such as Fan (2015), Deklerck and Wei (Deklerck &Wei, 2015) internet is an important medium in connecting Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals as well, even though the sensitivity of LGBTQ+ related events informs measures to broadcast events in more subtle ways, alter the locations on short notice (Fan, 2015, p.82.), and to remain mindful about avoiding content that could be interpreted as challenging to the regime or political in nature (ibid., p.81, Deklerck & Wei, p.20, Bao, 2015, p.50). Similarly, the collaborators of this study did use platforms like WeChat – regardless of censorship, or smartly around it – to stay in touch with their communities and to create new contacts, as was the case with these interviews.

In China – even with the tightened censorship – online tongzhi communities have been around in Mainland China since the end of 20th century, and play an important role in community support today (Deklerck & Wei, 2015). Since internet connects queer people everywhere, one might ask if a move to a first-tier city is really necessary for a person wanting to find their queer families. However, meeting people and mingling in LGBTQ+ events was a gateway into queer communities to Waltz, K, HC, and YY, even if these communities could later be kept active online.

Such was the case for myself – while living in Beijing, I actively sought out queer communities, anywhere, but only found the online communities after physically going to parties and being invited to different tongzhi WeChat groups and activities by community actives and new friends. (This was especially important since most of these events could not be publicly advertised due to security concerns and fear of having the event cancelled.) These events, while seemingly only 'nights at a bar', worked as places for discussions, networking, friend-making, and even activism. Schroeder (2015) has similarly discussed the meaning of 'play', simply 'having fun', in creating queer communities and laying ground for not only community activities, but also what could constitute as activism. The ability to 'come out and

play', physically, in safe queer spaces where sensitive discussions can be had, is still more than worthwhile in a world where online communities offer effective networks – especially when the online networks are supervised by a hostile regime.

4.2.3 Areal differences

Some of my interviewees also experienced there was a difference between first-tier cities. Indeed, there has been a steady flow of queers and activists out of Beijing among the experienced tightening of governance – many well-known activists and scholars have relocated to international metropoles known for their openness and their established queer activist scenes, such as Berlin and London. My own perception followed this narrative, as it was told by many friends and acquaintances – that Beijing is stricter, more controlled, and difficult to do activism or even organise events in.

It was then particularly interesting that HC, an activist herself, countered this view quite strongly, and with an interesting reasoning – HC said that she felt Beijing authorities were in fact much *easier* to negotiate with than those of her current hometown Guangzhou. 'The Guangzhou police is not used to doing this, so they are cruder. The Beijing police are accustomed to dealing with activists, so they talk with you, negotiate.' To HC, it was the same alarmed standby state of Beijing officials that made them easier to negotiate with, that some might describe as a difficulty.

Not surprisingly, the areal differences became more pronounced and meaningful when the interviewees talked about their hometowns. Interviewees from Southern and Central China, like HC, K, and Dawson, described a rather patriarchal culture, where boys were favoured over girls and traditional gender roles were valued. In contrast Waltz, from Liaoning, described a very different culture in her native Dongbei:

'Cross-dressing is a part of the traditional performance art culture in Dongbei, and in general, many Dongbei women have a very 'T' appearance. -- I don't change my looks when I go visit my parents – many married (heterosexual) ayis in Dongbei look like Ts.'

Waltz proposes that the local culture in Dongbei, then, makes it easier for 'T'-representing lalas to blend in. I was immediately reminded of my friend and ex-partner (a Dongbei native herself) telling me she needed to wear 'something feminine' when meeting her parents and then pulling out a Guns 'n' Roses band t-shirt – not necessarily the height of femininity, but speaking to the relative nature of gender expression in different cultures and different provinces: passing as straight appeared easier to her in Dongbei, just as Waltz proposed.

However, the different boundaries of what is accepted in gender presentation should not be too readily read as tolerance towards homosexuality or non-conformity – what Waltz describes here is exactly tolerance to 'T' appearance *because* of its proximity with that of a heterosexual, married woman in Dongbei. While Dongbei might have a culture of strong, masculine or androgynous women and thus allow for gender expressions that would be labelled non-conforming elsewhere, it is not necessarily much queerer in this sense: when I noted to Waltz I had seen 'many Ts' while traveling in Dongbei, she readily countered this perception: 'You cannot tell someone's sexual orientation by their looks. Married ayis look like T's in Dongbei', she recounted, denying my perception of Dongbei as a relative lala haven.

In addition, the freedom to play with the boundary of masculine and feminine might be very one-way: Waltz continued to point out that while Dongbei culture might allow some freedom to T's and transmasculine folks in general, someone that would be perceived by passers-by as a 'man wearing woman's clothes' – such as a transfeminine person or a trans woman – would 'attract curiosity' outside of a performance art context.

Meanwhile, Maoyi observed a very different setting in Southern culture:

'I think different places have very different environments: for example, Southern men are a bit girly (niángniáng 娘娘), take care of their looks... but there is still tradition, women have to be like this, and men like this. But still, men might put more effort into their appearance than women – but they are still straight men, no one will think it's weird.'

What Maoyi observes in Southern culture is in a way a mirror of what Waltz described in Dongbei – men can present in ways that elsewhere might be considered 'feminine', but this is again acceptable because of the common perception that they are still heterosexual.

Furthermore, Maoyi notes that tradition still stands and genders are confined to traditional perceptions of how they should present, although the perceptions of 'acceptable' limitations for female masculinity and male femininity vary by area and culture. These gender representations should not be read as tolerance for gender non-conformity, which in the eyes of the collaborators was still viewed as something that would attract negative attention, harassment, and even violence.

Whether a person is transcending with their expected gender expression as transfeminine or transmasculine seems to be a differentiating factor, too. Waltz notes that people readily call masculine-presenting lalas shuàigē 帅哥, 'handsome big brother', and similarly Huang (2015) points to how passers-by take many Ts for males (p.118). Waltz also recounts being driven out from women's bathrooms by ayis[12] for her T-like appearance.

Meanwhile, for transfeminine people, the shift might not be as smooth: one might be called not only 'a bit strange', like Waltz put it, but much worse: take, for example, the story of Liu Peilin, a trans woman who got a 'makeover' in live television to wear men's clothes, endearingly, but forcibly, dubbed 'Brother Daxi' ('Big Happiness'). Liu was referred to as a 'freak', that the TV show 'fixed' into a more appealing – that is, conforming – form (Zhang, 2020). It appears that the 'passing' (as a cisgender person) seems to be an important measure of transfeminine acceptability, aside from their heterosexuality: TV celebrity, the undoubtedly most famous transgender person in China, Jin Xing, enjoys a big following and has had a notable TV career: however, Jin is a married, heterosexual, gender-conforming and very passing trans woman – one who touts conservative views on marriage and relationships on Chinese television (Luo, 2017). In other words, Jin is conforming to the heterosexual ideal of a married woman in every other sense than her transness, so perhaps her popularity should not be considered as a massive win for the trans community. The intersections of other precarities might make the story unfold very differently for rural, non-passing, or working-class transwomen, as it has for Liu Peilin and my interviewee K.

The importance of passing was emphasised by K, a 29-year old trans woman working in

[12] Similarly, I remember countless times of having people question my gender when having short hair in China – I was frequently called a 'shuaige', and in women's bathroom, there would be conversations (in Chinese), whether or not the foreigner might be in the wrong bathroom. Since my own gender identity is rather fluid, I mostly found this entertaining, but understand how it might create feelings of discomfort of even unsafety.

engineering who presented, in her own words, 'as a boy'. K felt that in order to present her gender, she would need to be a passing, pretty, feminine girl, but that this was out of reach for her for economic reasons:

'If you want to present as a woman, you have to have surgeries – it's not enough to have reassignment surgery – you need to do your nose, eyes, take care of your skin... the surgeries are very expensive, and if a surgery fails, then what?'

The pressure to pass was so heavy that K had decided – with pressure from her father – to rather present 'male' than risk not passing as a woman, afraid of scrutiny from people in her social circles. Her struggle to present in a way she wanted persisted even in the 'open' first-tier city of Shanghai, even though her grievances took a different form, shifting from the realm of family and biopolitics to beauty norms and norms of what femininity and 'womanhood' are supposed to look like.

HC had a different take on her own gender, mapping out how she had initially ticked a 'zhōngxìng' (neutral or androgynous) box in a form, thinking herself as an androgynous woman[13], but after support and encouragement from friends gathered the courage to claim the identity of a transgender lala. However, the last time I spoke with HC about her gender at a queer film event in Beijing, her take had changed, shifting the focus away from the body, centring her lived experience instead: 'I am not trans, I haven't *crossed* into anything – I was never not a woman.' HC felt that her moving out of her home village and coming in touch with academic queer discourse, as well as queer friends and community, had made her into the person she was today.

Aside from the effects of growing up in the provincial culture, the effects of ethnic background and a non-local hukou were intersections I initially expected to play a big role in the collaborators' lives. However, some intersections did not, according to my interviewees, play much of a part in their lives in the big cities: one was ethnic status, which they openly spoke of when asked to freely introduce themselves. Considering the intersectional approach, I asked about how those interviewees that belonged to an ethnic minority experienced their status might have affected their lives. Each denied any such effect, and appeared quite

[13] orig. 中性化女生 *zhōngxìnghuà nǚshēng*.

nonchalant towards the topic, rather focusing on discussing their queer identities. Of course, this does not verify that ethnic minority status did not affect their lives in any way, only that they did not experience it as such or did not want to disclose that information – which they would have any right to do, and as this paper focuses on stories they *did* choose to tell, we shall leave the topic at that.

Similarly, I had originally expected the issue of outsider, *waidiren*, hukou to affect the lives of my interviewees to a great extent, but out of the ones I asked about the issue, only YY felt her outsider hukou made a big difference: 'Big cities are all not very equal.. they all want to protect the locals or rich people'. Her comment illuminated the notion of intersectioning precarities as those that matter – a waidiren hukou in itself would not in cause discrimination, but combined with a precarious socioeconomic situation, the situation would be different.

Waltz's account of the effects a waidiren hukou had illuminated precisely this: 'I don't think it matters – even if I had a Beijing hukou, there's no way I could afford a house in Beijing.' The inequalities and the relevant intersection seemed to be elsewhere, then: in socio-economic differences. Cleo also denied their hukou's influence in their life, citing how health insurances and other social services differ by a place and company, anyway. (It is perhaps noteworthy that none of my interviewees had children – hence, problems such as finding an urban school for children without a local hukou (Lu et al, 2019) was not a present concern to them.) My interviewees' views seemed to reflect a stereotypical view of Chinese city life: as long as one has money, anything is possible.

4.2.4 Negotiating the monogamous marriage ideal

I haven't really thought about marriage myself, because I don't tend to build very long-lasting relationships. If I have economic problems, my friends help me out, not parents. I've also purchased an insurance, because the state does not offer (good) social benefits.

- Waltz

The importance of family and marriage is rather well illuminated in the existence of 'marriage

markets' in Chinese parks, where Chinese parents gather to find potential spouses for their children - in fact, Shanghai has one so established, it has become a tourist attraction and can be found on online travel sites such as the Travel China Guide.

Some Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals choose the social facade of a heterosexual marriage of convenience to get their parents off their back and, as Engebretsen's interviewee, a gay man in a xinghun with a lala, put it: to end their 'parents' nagging' (Engebretsen, 2009, pp. 211-212). Hence, xinghun has a function as relationship strategy that, according to Engebretsen, has a practical function of making queer relationships possible behind the 'face' of a heterosexual marriage (ibid.) However, none of my interviewees expressed interest in entering a xinghun, and some even expressed strong distaste towards them: some considered 'sham marriages' unethical towards one's family or their spouse, some as an abandonment of being true to oneself. Some questioned marriage as a concept, yet most of the interviewees said they would either want or consider a marriage if it was legally possible.

As discussed earlier, according to Adamczyk and Cheng, the disapproval of homosexuality in Confucian societies is not as much informed by the homosexuality itself, but rather, by the tendency to shun divorce and a desire to keep the family intact (Adamczyk and Cheng, 2016) – which could also be linked to maintaining mianzi, since breaking norms directly affects the perception of mianzi by one's relatives and other social connections (Ma, 1999). Partly, this notion was reflected by the interviewees, who wished for greater recognition by the state law. Similarly, when many of my Chinese queer friends have told me they would want to get married with their partner, I have asked why, the answer usually following the line of: 'To get my parents' approval'. My close friend, who here goes by L, told me she thinks her parents would have no problem at all if she could legally get married – it was not so much her homosexuality itself that was the problem to her parents in her eyes, but the illegitimate status in the eyes of society, neighbours, and relatives. Another lala friend – let us call her C – described how after coming out, her mother told her she should 'either marry a man or move abroad', but that living with a woman in China would not be a possibility.

The collaborators' narratives reflected this notion, highlighting the 'face' aspect of marriage. For instance, YY noted that her father also experienced a lot of pressure himself:

'...He has a lot of pressure from his big family, not just his parents, but also relatives-- in a

*small town like ours, you have to organise a big wedding, have all the relatives there – **in that small place, it's not a matter of just two people**.'* (emphasis mine)

Like YY, many of the interviewees, while explaining their difficulties and disagreements with their parents, also pointed out how the pressure to conform to societal ideals of marriage and reproduction affected their families – how their parents were worried about people seeing their queer kids as 'perverts', how people would ask uncomfortable questions about their kid not being married at 30, and other questions that directly concerned the social realm and perceptions and reactions of family, relatives and neighbours.

Marriage also had an economic function to the interviewees: for instance, Waltz mainly viewed marriage through its role as a social and economic security network, but expressed no interest in the institution – instead, she had filled out the economic security role by purchasing an insurance; the social security network, for her, was her tight chosen family, whom she could turn to if times got trying. To the interviewees, gay marriage, if possible, might have offered a way to legitimise their relationship in the eyes of their relatives and family, but as the option was unattainable, they made other arrangements for company, social and economic security, and future-building.

4.2.5 Queer futurelessness and future-making

'In China, you cannot get married, or have children, there's a feeling of futurelessness, it's difficult to imagine a future. All you can do is get together and break up with people again and again.'

- Dawson

The question of future was both raised by my interviewees and, eventually – as by the accumulative, iterative methodology – brought into the interview question board by myself, after my second interviewee, Dawson, brought it up herself and the notion piqued my

curiosity.

In China having children and 'giving your parents grandchildren' is often considered to be an important part of being xiaoshun, and unmarried adult children – especially sons, who are the considered the most important bearers of the family line – are referred to as guanggun (Han, 2009), or 'a bare branch' (光棍) of the family tree. With many Chinese adults being only children, the family lineage will either continue or die off with them, making the pressure to have children – and the workload of taking care of aging parents – that much heavier. Some of the interviewees found the pressure uncomfortable and did not desire to marry or reproduce, while some, like Dawson, desired to build a future but begrudged the society for making it impossible in a stable, state-supported institution. In the lack of such a choice for her future, Dawson reckoned that it would be 'good to be wherever, as long as I have my friends', and noted that she originally moved to Beijing after her friends, not for a more lively LGBTQ+ scene, in particular.

The futurelessness of queer lives, of course, is not always tied to the availability of marriage or reproductive means: there is an ongoing discussion in the field of queer theory whether queers need to want a future at all. The juxtaposition of queer lives and 'reproductive futurism' has been sharply discussed by Lee Edelmann in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Edelmann's main idea is how the queer has been and is seen as a denial – be it forced or chosen – of the reproduction of society by having children: how the queer is seen as hedonistic and selfish, and an abandonment of 'good citizenship'. Similarly, Jack Halberstam has outlined the concept of the 'queer art of failure', a denial of the success- and (re)productivity-based values in a capitalist, heteronormative society (Halberstam, 2011). Of course, it is an ongoing, intense debate on whether or not queers should aspire to assimilate into the heteronormative society by adopting and appropriating dominant relationship models such as the institution of marriage and the nuclear family unit, or reject these ideals and build their own. The interviewees expressed desires that reflected both views, or fell on different point on this continuum of opinions.

I was initially surprised that it was my oldest interviewee, Waltz, in her forties, who most adamantly rejected the notion of monogamous cohabitation, reproduction and any reminiscent of a heterosexual married nuclear family model – when forming my hypothesis of the relevance of the age of my interviewees, I had, rather naïvely, thought that my older

interviewees would be more conservative. However, Waltz expressed no desire to build a marriage – even if gay marriage was legal: instead, she told me she would rather spend her old days with friends, going out to have fun. When I asked about whether she would still want to 'go out to play' (出去玩儿) when old, she laughed: 'I like to go out, so I hope I'd have friends to have fun with. My body is already different, but my heart is still out of the house having fun', she admitted, before adding: 'Going out is not at all good for health.'

Waltz did point out that her age affected other things, as well – for instance, she noted that the incessant questions about marriage and boyfriends had somewhat quieted down around the time she turned 35. Still, the questions were brought up regularly, and Waltz said her relatives and parents' neighbours we still very curious. 'So I don't have much contact with my relatives... I don't want to face those things.'

While some Chinese queers, like Waltz, reject the notion of a future-building in the form of a nuclear family, Dawson begrudged the difficulty of imagining a future and expressed an explicit will to build one: in an 'ideal future', she said, she would have a partner with whom to *make plans*. This desire of continuity was, to Dawson, made impossible by the legal ramifications for queer lives in the PRC, yet it was the desire to build one's own future through a monogamous relationship that outlined the *ideal* future in Dawson's case – to Dawson, the futurelessness was not a choice, but something forced upon her by the lack of.

4.2.6 Addressing the queer precarity and growing old in alternative ways – 'a Queer Nursing Home'?

'I don't think my parents had a child because they wanted to have one: it's the social pressure, the pressure of elderly care.'

- Cleo

To some, it was the similar futurelessness that made them toy with alternative ways of taking care of oneself and each other in old age. Many of the interviewees brought up, in some form,

the idea of a queer nursing home or cohabiting with friends in their old age – even Cleo, the youngest of them at 23, who answered that they 'hadn't really thought about it' when asked about their plans for *yanglao*, or elderly care, but then added, half joking, that 'maybe a queer nursing home' would be an option. Similarly, Waltz brought up the idea when asked about her plans for the future and specifically in relation to yanglao: 'Maybe a tongzhi… a lala nursing home', she echoed.

Of course, there were diverse reasonings for considering 'queer nursing homes' or growing old with friends – Waltz reckoned that she was not really the type to build long-term romantic relationships, and would like to live in a lala nursing home, while some cited the insufficient social welfare provided by the state as their reason to make 'backup plans'. The notion of children as an elderly care plan was emphasised in their stories, and the inability to legally have children outside of heterosexual marriage, then, made the pressure to come up with alternatives heavier. The 'queer futurelessness', then, takes on different meanings in societies where the social welfare system does not support elderly citizens enough to provide them with sufficient livelihood – the futurelessness becomes not only narrative in the sense of lacking 'a legacy', but very concrete in the worry of making-do in the everyday life of one's old age. In the opening quote of this chapter, Cleo outlines the banality of the thinking of children as a welfare security plan, doubting whether their parents even had a child out of the desire of having a family, noting that societal and economic pressures affected their parents as well. Cleo themselves, then, while admitting to not having thought about it much, cited a queer nursing home as an option preferable to reproduction.

Clearly, the wealth and socio-economic class of the interviewees affected their plans for future – it was the worry over survival that made them consider yanglao in the first place: a worry that wealth and a retirement plan could easily alleviate. This worry was present in the accounts of the interviewees, and has been echoed by Chinese queer friends in general – I remember clearly how my ex-partner noted that she would have to start saving up when she turned thirty, saying she would want to put aside a third of her salary every month. The reason, she explained, was the lack of certainty and state's support for aging population and specifically queers who do not have the institution of marriage to support them: this was her retirement plan.

Many of the interviewees talked about how the economic support from their parents was

contingent on their performance of xiao, their sexuality, or, even their gender. Queers are, then, even more precarious when it comes to yanglao. This added to the fact that queer people are more vulnerable in working life, to an extent when many of Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals are closeted in their workplace (the UN, 2016), makes Chinese queers especially vulnerable in the system that offers a decreasing degree of social welfare in elderly care. The interwoven intersection of economical precarity and queerness shaped how the interviewees imagined and prepared for their future, what ideal worlds and back-up plan realities they saw themselves in.

Of course, most of the interviewees were young adults in their twenties or thirties, which makes it understandable they had not made concrete plans for their old age – however, many of them were acutely aware and were reminded by their parents that in the current social welfare system of the PRC, they would have to either get rich or have children to guarantee care and comfort for their old age. And while children and marriage seemed either unattainable or undesirable to them, it was the notion of living with friends that seemed most attractive. 'I have thought about yanglao, it's important, but I don't have any especially good plans... I think it would be best to live together with some friends', Martin echoed.

While the interviewees reflected on their parents' desire of being taken care of by their children, they themselves expressed no such desire – even though some expressed wishes for a continuity, it took very different forms from the ideal heteronormative continuity and reproduction as Kong (2010) has described it. Having children seemed distant to the interviewees, and not one mentioned children as their 'yanglao plan', in contrast with their parents' wishes for their own and their children's futures. The precarity of queer lives, especially in the Chinese cultural and political context, where LGBTQ+ individuals cannot marry or have children outside of xinghun or other arrangements, encouraged the collaborators to imagine different futures where their chosen families could provide them with company, security, and support.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Key findings

Since the research project began, the collaborative (Monk et al, 2003; Gorman-Murray et al, 2016), accumulative and iterative (Boellstorff, 2016), flexible queer feminist approach and methodology has allowed for the project to change and evolve and the researcher to work with the people at the core of this study. The focus of the study has shifted to include queer kinship and alternative familial ties – due to the first interviewees emphasising the meaning friends held in their lives; the methods of finding interviewees has changed from finding people living in several cities to people finding people *from several provinces* – thanks to Maoyi's observation on the meaning of areal differences; I have become serious about the idea of writing the thesis' findings into an article – due to Dawson and Waltz expressing how important the research and following exchange of information would be.

This approach also allowed, like Hesse-Biber (2007) has suggested, for findings to emerge where they would not have were the research design more rigid – while the notion that the lived experiences of Chinese queer may vary depending on their home province and the local culture they grew up in, this complexity would have remained undiscovered if Maoyi had not brought up their thoughts on the research design, or if I were to not follow the direction. Whether or not the thoughts Waltz, Cleo and Martin had on how friends can constitute a family and how a queer nursing might be the 'ideal' of a retirement plan had emerged, would also have been left for luck, if Dawson's thoughts on the matter had not changed the interview design. Allowing the collaborator's to redirect my attention, bring up new perspectives and relevant factors shaping their lives allowed for a deeper understanding where we worked together to look at their stories of negotiating, surviving and living in a heteronormative society framed by traditional expectations of gender roles, xiao and maintaining face.

The accumulative, iterative, grounded-theory-related, queer feminist research design allowed for emerging new questions (Hesse-Biber, 2007), and tools to assess them within the queer paradigm that allows and embraces complexities and resists rigid normativity (Browne & Nash, 2016). The diverse data gathered in this relatively small-scale research project supports Engebretsen's and Schroeder's (2015) assertions on how queer methodology in the sinology

field can build bridges and unite individuals and communities, as well as allow for diverse stories on Chinese queer lives that defy binaries, orientalist narratives, and the confines of heteronormative readings of their complex realities. The concept of intersectionality – the notion that the differences in demographics such as age, wealth, home province, size of the home town, gender identity and gender expression, would affect the experienced social pressure and precarity of the collaborators – was reflected in the collaborators' accounts on their own lives, speaking to the strength of the intersectional feminist approach.

While some of the initial hypotheses were not reflected in the interviews, as some intersecting identities and attributes proved out to be more important in the experience of my interviewees, the flexible research design leaning on queer methodology allowed the focus to shift towards the factors the interviewees *did* deem worthy of further discussion. Factors such as an ethnic minority status were not viewed as something that had notable effects in the lives of the interviewees – of course, this was precisely their *experience*, which was the focus of the study, and these findings should not be taken to mean ethnic minority status does not shape queer Chinese lives, nor should it be taken at face-value to apply to any population in general.

However, intersectionality as an approach was important as instead of hukou or ethnic minority status, factors such as socio-economic class and wealth, gender identity and gender expression, and age, *were* seen by the interviewees as factors that affected and remarkably shaped their lives, how they experienced social pressure from family, their social circles, and the society at large, supporting findings by scholars like Engebretsen (2009), Kam (2013) and Rofel (2007). These intersections also shaped how they viewed their lives, ideals, dreams, opportunities and vulnerabilities in both future and the present.

The collaborators' relationships with their parents varied from very cordial and friendship-like to complete estrangement – however, all of them felt that their relationship with their parents had been made more difficult by their queerness: or more precisely, their parents' difficulty to come to terms with their child's queerness. It is noteworthy, however, that the interviewees felt their parents also experienced pressure, and lot of the difficulty was due to the notions of 'losing face' and the observed gaze of relatives, neighbours, and society at large. For many of them, the intruding questions from relatives and fears of 'interventions' were also a rationale to return home more rarely, or to even stop visiting altogether.

Some of the interviewees redefined notions like xiao/filial piety altogether, ascribing them meanings of love and care, while abandoning the traditional notions of obedience and performative maintaining of 'face' as parts of xiao. These alternative readings expand on works on mianzi, xiao, and familial ties and LGBTQ+ by scholars such as Engebretsen (2009), Kong (2010), and Berry (2001), placing the paper in continuum of studies on LGBTQ+ China, while adding new knowledge through the queer feminist approach and the rural/urban focus.

The meaning of friends – especially queer ones – was manifested throughout the interviews. To some, friends were a second family – to some, they were the only one. These queer kinships offered safety and security to manifest and reveal parts of them that could not exist or be represented around their natal families. Their different precarities, their queerness included but not the sole factor, also manifested in how they planned for their futures, how they experienced the thought of aging and making plans for yanglao, dreaming of 'queer nursing homes', of communities where they could age outside the confines of societal pressures to choose a heterosexual marriage and reproduction, and instead experience aging with friends.

While all the collaborator's experienced pressure and difficulties, they all felt that migrating to a bigger city had made their lives easier to a varying degree – some had come out to friends and even colleagues, some had found a community or a partner, even a new, chosen family. However, this did not mean that their lives in their rural or small-town homes would have been hopeless – there were both struggles and safe havens in both worlds, and their experiences often escaped such rigid binaries. Like Dawson said, it was indeed 'getting better' in a small town, and the first-tier cities were not discrimination-free zones – however, they did offer new beginnings and more open futures to all of the interviewees.

5.2 Limitations and recommendations for future research

While this project added to knowledge on Mainland Chinese queers with rural and small-town backgrounds, filling gaps in knowledge about experiences rarely mapped out, several gaps in

the knowledge about these groups remain: while the scope of the research covered a lot of the Chinese map, the westernmost provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet were not represented in the study, and as politically sensitive areas remain largely under-researched. Future research projects into queers in and from these areas would offer valuable insight into queer lives and localities in areas that are among the most politically sensitive in Mainland China. Due to the sensitivity of the areas and the overall sensitive nature of queer research, a queer feminist approach that places the safety and participation of the interviewees first could result in emergence of vital information while taking special precautions on safety, making the research more ethical while expanding on knowledge in these under-researched areas.

It is also important to conclude that while the collaborators came from diverse backgrounds, identified with a variety of genders and sexual orientations, and each had a very unique lived reality coloured by different intersecting experiences, all of my interviewees were middle-class, relatively young, spoke fluent Mandarin and were to some extent connected with LGBTQ+ communities. This was manifested in their fluency in 'global' queer lingo, as well as some collaborator's ease with discussing gender theory in academic language. Their proximity with LGBTQ+ communities also made it possible for them to see my call for collaborators and connect with me. While this project gained important data on rural-to-urban queer migrants in Mainland China, still, as was reflected by community actives such as Waltz, research geared towards non-Mandarin speaking, older, and working-class queer populations of different ethnicities from and in rural China and voicing their experiences would allow local activist groups to have valuable exchange of knowledge with their queer compatriots and allow them to exchange help and resources.

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APPENDIX

List of collaborators
/ special thanks to:

Cleo, 23, Shanghai

Cleo is a university student originally from a small town in Jiangxi province. They identify as trans non-binary and pansexual.

Dawson, 24, Beijing

Dawson is a painter and a tattoo artist originally from a small town in Guizhou province. She identifies a 'woman who likes women'.

HC, 25, Guangzhou

HC is an NGO founder originally from a small village in Guangdong province. She identifies as a woman and a lala.

K, 29, Shanghai

K is an engineer originally from a village in Sichuan province. She identifies as a trans woman who likes women.

Maoyi, 26, Beijing

Maoyi is a designer originally from a small town in Fujian province. They identify as queer.

Martin, 30, Beijing

Martin is a welfare program manager, originally from a small town in Inner Mongolia. He identifies as a gay man.

Waltz, 40, Beijing

Waltz is a manager at a small company, originally from a small town in Liaoning province. She identifies as a female homosexual (女性同性恋).

YY, 28, Shanghai

YY is an artist originally from a small town in Guangxi province. She identifies as a pansexual woman.

All information is published with the permission of the interviewees. Age presented is the collaborator's age at the time of the interview.